

THE IMMORTAL LOVER

JOHN A. STEUART









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THE IMMORTAL LOVER

F. G. M.,

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE CAP OF YOUTH

The Love Romance of

Robert Louis Stevenson

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, MAN AND WRITER

A Critical Biography

THE MINISTER OF STATE

WINE ON THE LEES

THE SAMARITANS

A SON OF GOD

THE ETERNAL QUEST

THE IMMORTAL LOVER

A BURNS ROMANCE

BY JOHN A. STEUART

LOVE UNCONQUERED IN THE FIGHT,
LOVE WHO MAKEST HAVOC OF WEALTH;
NONE CAN ESCAPE THEE; AND HE TO
WHOM THOU HAST COME IS MAD. . . .
IT IS A POWER ENTHRONED BESIDE THE
ETERNAL LAWS; FOR THERE THE GOD-
DESS APHRODITE IS WORKING HER
UNCONQUERABLE WILL.

THE ANTIGONE



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PREFATORY

IN PRESENTING the Life of Burns in novel-form I have been concerned almost wholly with the man and only incidentally with the poet. For, as his best critic, Carlyle, remarked a century ago, "True and genial as his poetry must appear, it is not chiefly as a poet but as a man that he interests and affects us." Moreover, the poet has won for himself a secure immortality; the man is still the subject of vehement, even virulent, debate. Probably more than any other man of letters of recent centuries he has been the victim of delirious idolatry and rabid detraction, miracles of fatuity (too often) which give us, not a human being but a caricature. Byron's memorable judgment is more to the point. For one thing it very pertinently indicates the difficulty of presenting Burns as he actually was, as he bore himself in relation to his fellow men, and especially in relation to the many women who entered so intimately and potently into his short, tumultuous life.

For better understanding something of his environment has been introduced; and about him, for the same reason, are grouped those with whom he came into closest contact, who affected his career and helped to make or mar his happiness. No man lives, or could live, wholly by or for himself, least of all could Burns with his ardent social instincts, his vehement temperament, his flaming passions, united to a candour and a gift of self-expression excelling all others of his time or since. In his composition there was nothing of the hermit, nothing of the ascetic, nothing of the common stuff of saints. No man was ever more intensely alive in the purely human, mundane sense of being part and parcel of the world about him. That world was a strange mixture of good and evil. Serious,

upright, reverent, honest, God-fearing it was at the same time gross, hideous, drunken, licentious, hypocritical, oppressive, rancorous, vindictive. Its good elements he revered; its bad he despised and satirized. But revering or despising, he was in it and of it: and in the end it sealed his fate. Hence for truth of portraiture it must have its place as background to the picture.

Of certain obscure and disputable episodes I have not hesitated to give my own rendering and interpretation. Some gaps have been filled, and in the general scheme I have permitted myself the freedom which is the life of the novel and the drama, but there is nothing which is not true in spirit and in fact. Here and there, for reasons which the reader will easily discern, I have taken slight, very slight, liberties with chronology. But again there is nothing to distort the essential integrity and purport of events. Burns has been much the prey of the moralist avidly seeking a text for sermons. I have endeavoured to obey his own injunction:—

But still the preaching cant forbear,
And ev'n the rigid feature.

He was the indomitable enemy of cant in an epoch when cant was especially fashionable and powerful. Inevitably he suffered persecution; for bigotry can be ruthlessly cruel; inflamed by Pharisaism and self-interest it readily becomes a ferocious tyranny. Ferocious it was towards Burns. Luckily for literature and the race he retaliated in a manner which makes him, not only the first of satirists, but a moral and religious reformer of unique importance and influence. In the Liberation War of Humanity there never was a more valiant, and seldom a more effective soldier. Burns and Liberty are names which must always go together.

For the rest I should like to add, that my story is not the result of a hasty or perfunctory study of a career offer-

ing fascinating and dramatic material for the novelist. Since first I took an interest in books I have been a student and lover of Burns; a lover of the poet, and, faults notwithstanding (was ever mortal perfect?), scarcely less a lover of the man. How much of pity is mixed up with affection and admiration is not for me to determine.

J. A. S.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

And they called Rebekah and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go.

THE trysting place in the depth of the scented green-wood was sweet as Eden on that radiant Sabbath in May. A sequestered nook in the midst of gleaming, sunlit, spring foliage, it was the very spot, you would have said, where a poet might dream his dreams and be at peace with fortune and himself. Yet as he paced to and fro on the tiny open patch of greensward, awaiting the appointed hour and the face that was now all the world to him, he saw nothing of the scene, felt nothing of its charm. Half crazed by a legion of tormenting emotions—love, hate, rage, remorse, defiance, a rankling pride, a blazing sense of wrong—he was blind to all about him. He was a tall, burly, rustic figure, dressed in russet Sunday-best, stooped in the shoulders as from excessive toil, yet giving the impression of electric energy and, at present, a temper at boiling point. He paced jerkily, stopping abruptly over some fiery thought and as abruptly starting again, his mouth compressed, his strong, swarthy face and troubled eyes a fretted mirror of the tumult within.

Of a sudden he halted, his eyes roaming over the landscape, as though at last he were aware of its cool and tranquil beauty, so striking a contrast to his own wild, hot mood. Oh! it was fair, inexpressibly fair and dear. How often, ah! how often had he wandered there by himself in summer's glory or winter's tempest, his whole being uplifted in a rapture of adoration and song. And now the end was come. He would wander there no more, no more for ever. Spring would unfold her magic robes and he should not be there to see; birds would chant and warble, making the woodland merry, and he should not

be there to hear! The sights and sounds, indeed, would be sure to haunt him, but only in an exile's dreams.

All at once there was a quick rustle behind him, and bursting as it seemed, from a bower of hawthorn, a young girl stood before him, her eyes bright, her face flushed with the glow of expectancy and excitement.

"Oh! Robin," she panted, "I had such trouble to get away without anybody seeing me."

He sprang to her, his face transfigured as by a miracle, and for one breathless moment she was folded in his arms. Then he held her off, looking deep into her eyes.

"But you came?"

"Did you think I wouldn't? Nothing on earth would keep me."

He gazed down at her with devouring looks. In the bright sunshine her fair, silken hair shone like living gold; her softly curved cheek had the hue of summer roses, and, dearest of all, in her frank, innocent, blue eyes was the light which was his heaven to see.

"My Mary," he murmured. "My brave, bonnie Highland lassie." And then on a breath which shook him like a sob. "My Own!"

She moved a hair-breadth closer.

"Yours, Robin."

He bent towards her till their faces were almost touching, his eyes melting in unutterable tenderness. They were wonderful eyes, brilliant, piercing, haunting, black as ripe sloes, eyes that fascinated hardened men and made women hold their breath, they knew not why. Their expression now almost made Mary gulp.

"In spite of everything?" he said, in a low, tense voice that thrilled through her. "Though all the world should rail and find fault?"

Her eyes met his in soft upbraiding.

"Oh! Robin, need you ask?"

"Love's token on that. Now let us walk," he suggested,

a divine rapture that drowned all thought of trouble, pulsing in every nerve. "See, a carpet of God's own making spread for us—all bathed in sunlight and spring scents. The wild wood smiling a welcome to us, my love."

And in truth as they sauntered hand in hand by bosky, fragrant path or tangled copse, all nature seemed to breathe a benediction on their love. It was a sorely tried love; and the ordeal at hand seemed sorest of all. But of that they did not talk just yet. For one exquisite moment the anguish of parting was banished and forgotten. Utterly unconscious of all save themselves they wandered on till they were brought up by the Coilsholm, in local vernacular, the Coalyum, burn babbling and purling deep down in its rock-girt channel overhung by hazel, hawthorn, and birch. Then turning downwards they followed its wimpling course to the river Ayr. Looking sideways at Mary, her lover noticed with a pang, that a swift change had come over her face. The flush of excitement and joy was already gone and with it the June roses and the star-like brightness of her eyes. Slipping an arm about her, he drew her to him.

"My dearie is not afraid, is she?" he whispered low in her ear.

"It is very hard, Robin."

There was heartbreak in her voice; heartbreak, too, in the white tremulous face turned up to his. With a sudden, frantic clasp he took her in his arms.

"Hard," he repeated, the old rage against the injustices of Fate surging fiercely along his veins. "It's, it's as if the very fiends were venting their spite. But never mind. We'll be up sides with them yet. We are not hanging our harp by Babel's streams to weep, not by long odds. Happiness will be ours though all our little parochial furies should spit and split in venom." She looked up at him through welling tears.

"Must you go, Robin?" In her fond heart there was still a lingering hope that she might keep him.

He drew a deep, hard breath. "So it is decreed. My native land has no place for me. It is go or starve. Scotland disowns me as a bad, worthless man."

She took his hand and stroked it, the hand that wrote poetry which people praised in accents of wonder, even while others reviled and persecuted the writer.

"You are not bad and worthless," she contradicted, with a flicker of her native Highland fire. He looked at her fondly, almost pityingly.

"My brave, generous darling, you will perform a miracle if you get some folk to believe that. No, my love, they would not believe you. However, as Marianna remarks in 'Measure for Measure,' the best men are moulded out of faults and are all the better for being a little bad. Your goodness, dearie, will root out all wickedness."

She knew nothing of Marianna or "Measure for Measure"; indeed, in the intensity and absorption of her own thoughts she scarcely heard the reference.

"Can't I go with you, Robin?"

"Go with me? Oh! my Mary, would to God! we could go together. The thought of leaving you, when I need you so much, is maddening."

"Then take me, Robin."

The pleading, quivering words struck to his heart like a dagger. But a grim, stern voice said ruthlessly, "Impossible, impossible, you cannot take her."

Literally his sole chance, his sole hope, was to accept the offer of thirty pounds per annum from the nigger-driving planter in Jamaica. And poverty, surely the primal curse, decreed he must go alone. Even his passage money was still lacking. As she knew he was trying to raise it by publishing a book of random rhymes. It might be that the country which disowned the man would think better of the poet and buy his wares. A few pounds, so miser-

ably few, in comparison with some men's superfluous wealth, would get him across the Atlantic. To be exact a paltry nine guineas would suffice, less, much less, than many a gay, young spark or abandoned old roué spent on an hour's debauchery in London. It was a satire to make the grim gods laugh. All the more need for courage. With a look of ineffable fondness he drew her yet closer.

"Fate may frown but so long as I have my Mary I have the best gift that even Heaven itself can bestow. And, one day, not far off, I will come back to claim and crown my queen, my sweet Highland lassie." She smiled wistfully through tears.

"You will be far, far away. Maybe you will forget, Robin."

"Forget?" he cried in protest. "Forget the lassie that nestles in the very core of my heart? That will happen, sweetheart, with the last breath I draw and not a moment sooner. Surely you do not mistrust your Robin."

She fondled the hand she still held.

"I'd die, Robin, if you forgot."

The desire to keep him in spite of everything returned with tenfold force. All her love was his, every iota of it, as, she knew, his was hers. Their brief romance had been a whirlwind of bliss. It had come into Mary's life, a tornado of passion, sweeping her off her feet, whirling her out of all known orbits of feeling. For Robin was a lover in ten thousand, ay, in ten millions. Now in the very moment of supreme and perfect happiness they were to be torn asunder. The old, old cry rose in her heart. Why, oh! why was Fate so cruel? And, as of old, there was no answer.

In a palpitating silence they wandered on, taking no heed of their steps. As in pity for her distracted, overwrought children, Nature seemed to be luring them into her own green, hallowed solitudes, to prove once again her gifts of peace and healing.

Presently on a sun-warmed bank, they sat down, close as a pair of clinging magnets. Making the most of the present moment, Mary tried hard to shut off the nightmare thought of parting. As it would not go, she whispered shyly:

"Robin, I have brought you something—for a keepsake. Promise you will take it and keep it." He promised, he would have promised anything, and Mary, fumbling with nervous fingers, took from her bosom a small volume.

"A Bible," he cried in utter astonishment.

"The good book, Robin," she said simply, "that tells what we are to do. When—when," she faltered, as though the words would not come, "When—you are—far away will you read it, Robin, and think of your Mary?"

He took the tiny volume, kissed it reverently, and then, with a reverence ten times heated by love, kissed the giver.

"This is wonderful," he said, on a great breath. "Our good angel must have whispered the same thing into our hearts in the same moment. See, my keepsake for you."

And he, too, produced a Bible, only his was in two small volumes. Mary could scarcely breathe.

"For me, Robin?"

"For you, my ever dearest. Look on this."

He opened one volume, the Old Testament. On the fly leaf, written in a large bold hand, was her name,

MARY CAMPBELL

followed by his masonic mark and beneath:

And ye shall not swear
by My Name falsely
I am the Lord.—

Levit: 19th. chap: 12th. verse.

Then, opening the second volume, he displayed the inscription—

ROBERT BURNS

Mossgavil (the old name for Mossgiel), also followed by a masonic mark, and below:

Thou shalt not forswear
thyself, but shalt perform
Unto the Lord thine
Oath.

Matth. 5th. chap: 33rd. verse.

He held both volumes out to her.

"Hold them with me," he said. "So. As our love is sacred, so on God's sacred word we pledge it."

And holding the Bible between them, they pledged their troth, though indeed, no such pledging was needed.

In her confusion, of awe, joy, fear, and a hundred other chaotic feelings, Mary had but a dim idea of the words actually spoken. But she knew, as she knew the pulsations of her own heart, that they meant love, truth, constancy, and honour.

"They are yours now, dearest," he said, releasing his hold. "Holy pledges to be kept as such. Let no eye but your own see them."

With trembling hands Mary took the great gift.

"I will keep them, Robin," she answered brokenly. "Night and day they will be with me. And as often as I look at them I will think of you, and as often as I say my prayers, I will think of you. Yes, and oftener, far, far oftener, for I will be thinking of you all the time and praying that you may come back safe to me—soon." And then, as if the cry of her heart were not to be suppressed—

"Oh! Robin, Robin."

CHAPTER 2

SHE seemed to swoon into his arms, and he held her in a choking passion of tenderness and pity.

"My Mary," he murmured, pressing his lips to the golden head. "My Mary."

She nestled closer, her arms stealing up about his neck, and clasping like a vice. In that locked embrace they scarcely seemed to breathe. The very air was enchanted. A gentle wind, a mere baby breeze, made soft, lulling music in the tree tops; from afar came the sound of a church bell, its cracked, wretched jangle mellowed by distance; about them birds fluttered and chirruped. A stone-cast away the Ayr lisped and gurgled, kissing "its pebbled shore" with a murmur which one of them was to recall with heart-wrung poignancy.

Mary lay still as a child comforted after a storm of weeping. Robin, too, was still, but in his heart thoughts were seething which for her dear sake he durst not utter. His Mary, in the blackness of darkness, the bitterness of fortune, his only refuge, his only solace. Grievously wounded, soiled in honour, forsaken, ignominiously cast off he had turned to her and found balm for his bruised heart and spirit. Nor did he forget that her pure maiden-love was given in the face of blazing calumny. He knew that well she knew how evil tongues, mixing truth and falsehood with malice, (a deadly mixture) soiled his name. If "the Lord's ain folk" had their way with him an empty tar-barrel and "two red-peats" would seal his doom; for of all forms of hate, the fiercest, most ruthless is the hate of the self-righteous Pharisee sitting in the seat of judgment. Into his torn, distracted life, Mary came like a Heavenly effluence. And if love, pure and unselfish, consecrated, as he was sure it did, then she was that

Divine thing—a gift direct from God himself. He looked down on her with dewy eyes. She in her innocence and purity clinging to him. To him! God be merciful to them both.

Still they sat on, speechless, because they had so much to say. Shadows deepened in the greenwood; the air grew chill, the grass damp with dew, and yet they did not stir. They might have been asleep in a fairyland of bliss. Then suddenly, as though struck by an icy blast, Mary shivered in his arms.

"Is my love cold?" he asked, startled out of his trance. She sat up, her eyes clouded with fear.

"Oh! Robin, I feel as if some one walked on my grave."

He affected to laugh. "And you safe with me? Dreaming, dearie; and dreams they say, are always contrary. Take it as an omen of happiness."

"I am cold to the bone," she answered on a tremulous breath. "My very flesh is creeping."

He stroked her cheek, her hair, murmuring words of comfort and endearment. For once she did not seem to be aware of his caress.

"Robin," she said, and this time there was sheer terror in her tone. "Do—do you think God gives us warning? Has he ways of telling us what is going to be?"

He smiled reassuringly. "I don't know. I am not in His secrets as some folk who ape omniscience pretend to be. So far as I can judge He keeps His own counsel and leaves us guessing and speculating. As for warnings, don't let your Highland superstitions run away with you. They're just such stuff as I might use to make your flesh creep with a ghostly rhyme."

"They are not superstitions," she contradicted. "I know they are not. Robin—" She stopped, as if she dared not utter what was in her mind.

"Yes, Mary?"

"If—if—" Her breath was coming in short, hard gasps. "If—I was taken from you—would you be—very sorry?"

"Good God!" he cried. "That question from you?"

She seemed to be choking; her throat was paralyzed by a sharp constricting pain; in her head was the sound of drums beating furiously.

"Forgive me, Robin," she managed to falter. "But—but you see I am afraid. Is it very foolish of me?"

"Back to that?" he thought, with an inward gulp. Aloud he said in fond reproach:

"So, my Mary is doubting me after all?"

She looked at him a full half minute through tears.

"No, Robin, every word you tell me is true. I know that. And—and it is because—" She did not finish the sentence; but he understood. He was quick to understand.

With a half furtive wipe of her eyes, she rose, partly averting her face, as if ashamed of her weakness. Next instant she cried out how late it was. And in fact, the gloaming had stolen on them unaware. "The golden hours on angel wings" flew on unnoted.

Now like an unsuspected enemy leaping from ambush, the moment of parting was upon them.

"They'll be out searching for me," said Mary, her lip quivering in spite of all her bravery. "And we mustn't be seen together, must we?"

At times it hurt her to think their love must for the present be secret. But she bore up, telling herself that when persecutors, detractors, and traducers were confounded and silenced, then would come his triumph and hers. There was even a certain exquisite piquancy in the idea of concealment.

"Till our love is crowned in sight of the world," Robin told her, "why should we pander to vile tongues avid to invent and spread evil reports? Our love, my sweet, is for ourselves alone. It is too good, too precious to be defiled in the public mouth."

Such language was a little beyond her; but then he was a poet. Often he said things she did not understand, things too deep and wonderful for her, only where her mind failed, her heart understood.

Slowly, very slowly, they walked with lagging, reluctant steps back to the edge of the darkening wood, his arm tenderly about her. There by a spreading hazel bush, screening a gap in an old stone wall, they halted, dumb, as if bereft of the powers of speech. Half a dozen yards off ran the highway. Two men were going along, talking loudly. They had been to church, where for two stricken hours the Rev. Mr. Auld poured out the vials of his wrath on the wicked town of Mauchline, to which Sodom and Gomorrah, it appeared, were models of righteousness. A dram on the sly, several times repeated, in Johnny Doo's, alias the Whitefoord Arms, helped to wash the taste of brimstone from the mouths of the passersby, who, now happily recovered from the immediate fear of hell, were pleasantly regaling themselves with choice tit-bits of scandal. More than once they mentioned "Mossgiel," meaning, Scots fashion, the man, not the place. Mary tried to shut her ears, but she could not help hearing.

"A fell hand wi' the lasses," remarked one, chuckling from the midriff.

"Amaist as fell as King Dauvit of old we heard o' the day in that blithe bit o' scripter," responded the other, chuckling in turn. "Fegs it was rousin'. They say Jean's for layin' by the snood, poor lass. Sookin' the honeycomb on the sly. Ah! weel the howdy and the cutty stool's the end o' *that*. It'll be mair business for the Session. We maun be in at the kirkin'." And they laughed brutally.

With a shudder Mary put her hands over her ears. Her lover noted the act; but, though cut to the quick, he said nothing. A moment she was quiet, as if holding her breath; then with an abrupt, impetuous movement, she threw her arms about his neck, clinging to him, as though to

make her action tell what her tongue could not. Then dizzily and before he knew he was holding aside a hazel branch to let her pass out. On the other side of the dyke she turned and over the cold, dew-wet stones their lips met in a long, passionate kiss.

"Fare thee weel," he said, his voice quivering. "Fare thee weel, always, always, fare thee weel, my love. And remember you take my heart with you."

She stroked his cheek with a shaking hand. "And I leave mine with you, Robin."

"In safe keeping, my Mary. Our faith is plighted on the Sacred Word. As you love me one thing you won't forget; your promise to meet me at Greenock."

"I will meet you, Robin. Nothing—but—but death itself will prevent me."

She kissed him again, her whole wrought-up being in the act; then somehow, she did not know how, she tore herself away, going at a run as in flight, though she could not see the road for her tears.

Motionless and rigid as a statue, he watched her in the failing light. For a moment he fancied she might turn and come back for one last, fervent embrace. But she did not, because she dared not trust herself. The sound of her hurrying footsteps grew fainter and fainter: she became dimmer and dimmer, faded like a shadow into the May dusk. Then blank stillness. The night had swallowed her. She was gone—and with her more than he could put into words.

Scarcely breathing, he seemed part of a frozen, petrified silence. His blood stood still in his veins; his heart was cold as ice, heavy as lead. And as he stood, in a chaos of hope and dread and longing, a voice that was as the voice of a mocking Fate sounded in his ears. "You should have kept your Mary. You should have kept your Mary. Look and see if the hazards are not all against you."

With a sudden, suffocating breath, in effect a sup-

pressed groan, he leaned over the stone dyke, limp and quaking. Mary's pleading words came back to him like a wail out of the darkness. "Take me with you, Robin. Take me with you." He bowed his head as one utterly broken.

By and by he raised himself, and staggered out into the road, turning towards Mossgiel, the home that was so soon to cease to be home. He was so cold that his teeth chattered; but the cold was nothing to the black, gnawing misery, the numbing desolation of his heart. And part of his ordeal, at times the worst part, was that he must hide his feelings and smile. Not a soul must know of his distress or guess what he felt and feared.

CHAPTER 3

NEXT morning before Mauchline got the sleep out of its eyes, Mary was seated beside her master, Gavin Hamilton, Solicitor, behind the fast trotting bay, the best stepper in the countryside, it was said, the gig wheels gleaming and flashing gaily in the level sun. The day was opening blithely; there was exhilaration in the crisp, clear air and the wide rosy spaces above. But as she looked round the familiar scenes which meant so much to her, Mary's heart was heavy. Well for her, however, that she went early on that fateful day. For things were afoot which, had she known of them or guessed, would have overwhelmed her with terror and horror.

Returning several hours later, musing on many things, including Mary and her sudden departure, Mr. Hamilton was hailed from the opening of a hedged-in lane by a familiar voice. He drew up and, with a swift glance right and left, his friend, the poet, stepped into the road. Their greeting was that of boon companions.

"Out early, Gavin," remarked Burns.

"Yes," answered Gavin. "Catching the coach at Kilmarnock. Our little nursemaid's off and I drove her in. It seems she's been hurriedly called home to Campbeltown. Nothing serious the matter, I make out, though she seemed a bit mysterious and secretive. Just a feminine freak, I suppose. Women are kittle cattle when they take ideas into their heads. Well! there's a sweet wee lass the less in Mauchline to-day."

"So she's gone," said Burns.

"Ay, rattling along at ten miles an hour on the high road to Glasgow."

Burns stroked the silken flank of the bay, which was smoking, for, like Jehu, Gavin was a hard driver.

"A bit warm," he observed.

"We had to catch the coach," Gavin explained. "And anyway, as you know, the bay doesn't dawdle and crawl."

"Never, with you holding the reins. A bonnie bit of horseflesh, Gavin."

They said that Burns could never keep anything to himself, that what was in must come out, though the very devil himself were shamed. Not an act of folly committed by him, they would have told you, not a thought or emotion, however profane, that thrilled through his wild passionate nature, but must be blazoned to the world in scoffing verse or prose, as though he delighted to shock and scandalize. In one particular at least, they were egregiously wrong. The name of Highland Mary never passed his lips to any soul in any company, not even to his bosom friend, Gavin Hamilton. That secret, at any rate, he kept inviolate.

"For Mauchline, I suppose?" said Gavin. "Jump up."

Burns looked at him smiling a dry, wry little smile.

"Not to-day," he replied. "Nor yet to-morrow, or the day after, if I can help it. Just at present I am giving the beautiful, beloved town of Mauchline the widest berth possible."

"Oh!" said Gavin, his eyes all at once wide. "What has Mauchline done to you?" Again Burns smiled that dry, wry little smile.

"It's not what it has done, but what it is trying to do. It seems, my dear Gavin, that my private, personal recreations are bearing public and most scandalous fruit."

Gavin emitted a long, low whistle.

"Oh! ho, oh! ho! sits the wind in that quarter? But what's the actual trouble? I have heard nothing of it."

"Oh! just a little *habeas corpus* affair," replied Burns, with a grin devoid of amusement. "They think so much of my precious person they would fain keep the winds of heaven from visiting it too roughly. For that beneficent

purpose, they desire to make me Royal Geordie's guest for an indefinite period." He laughed grimly. "The upshot is that for once in my life, I am quite scriptural; for it is God's truth I have not where to lay my head."

Gavin drew in his breath sharply. "You mean—?"

"I think 'fugitive' is the word," interrupted Burns. "They're after me, or soon will be. At this very moment the hounds may be in full cry. They thought to take me by surprise, but a little bird whispered—and here I am, a wanderer at large like any commoner of air."

A sudden light flashed on Gavin. "A writ," he said excitedly, putting two and two together. "A writ *in meditatione fugae*." Burns nodded.

"I suppose that's the Latin for it. Just as well to veil delicate things in the delicacy of an alien tongue. In plain homespun it'll be quod if they catch me."

"Quod," echoed the man of law, instantly on the alert. "Why should it be quod? It can only be a case of finding caution. Jump up! We'll soon settle that."

"There shines true friendship," returned Burns, touched to gratitude by the ready offer. "You all over, Gavin, and I am grateful from the heart. But not for worlds."

Gavin stared. "Why not?" he demanded.

"Because," was the answer, "I am generous enough to let my enemies have their own way. So being moved to Christian charity, I say, let vindictiveness do its worst. Caution, my dear Gavin! Not if I feed on locusts and wild honey, or die in a ditch. I'm not to be caught in that snare."

"You puzzle me," said Gavin. "What's your plan of evasion?"

"Did I not say that I am scriptural? Like the prophet of old, I have the wilderness—woods, fields, hedges, lanes, and byways, if need be caves and mountain fastnesses. I could make shift to sleep in the heather as well as any Covenanter who ever defied persecution and the insolence

of office. To-night, with luck, I may take my rest in a hut in Old Rome Forest."

"Dangerously near Kilmarnock," said Gavin.

"But conveniently remote from Mauchline and Moss-giel," rejoined Burns. "Listen, Gavin, that you may understand."

And in swift, hot phrases he stated the cardinal facts of the case.

"So you see," he ended, "why I am forced to decline your generosity, and also why I must tear myself away for the time being from the charming society and dear delights of Mauchline, may its shadow increase."

"They're daft," said Gavin, disregarding the tone of irony. "They're daft—and worse, and they pretending to be so godly and religious."

"Religious," echoed Burns. "What's religion as practised by them for, if not for persecution? So persecuted they the prophets, my friend." Of a sudden his black eyes flashed, and in wrath they were terrible as lightning. "The leprous beasts would consign me to the pains of hell. May their godly charity recoil on themselves. Purging by fire. Maybe I need it, oh! maybe I do; but if so, what of the loathsome hypocrites that would give the very deil himself the scunner? Do they need purging by penal fires?"

"Even fire cannot purge the putrid," observed Gavin. "It can only consume the festering thing. Have I, too, not suffered the slings and arrows of pious persecution?"

"And made the persecutors wish they had never meddled with you," said Burns, with fiery relish. "I must make my muse buckle to that in a pretty little satire. We have blistered them already; next time we'll cut deep and as a token of goodwill drop a little acid into the wound. But hark you, Gavin, little as they suspect it they are furnishing me with just the needed excuse for being done with

certain highnosed folk who are riding for a fall. Let them go ahead, stinting nothing of their spite and malice."

"They are likely to do that," said Gavin with conviction.

"I would not have them do otherwise," responded Burns, unconsciously squaring his shoulders. "'Tis my way to freedom. And when all is over, it will be *vive l'amour et vive la bagatelle* in spite of them. That's the motto, and you may wager your last groat I'll live up to it."

Then, with a quick glance up and down the road—"But we're forgetting. It would be mortal unwise for us to be seen together. Association with me does no man any good these times."

"That's as may be," returned Gavin promptly. "Some of us are not yet in the leading strings of Daddy Auld or Black Jock Russell, or any of their following. All the same," and he grinned knowingly, "we haven't met. As it turns out I haven't seen you at all."

"I didn't for a moment think you had," Burns grinned in turn. "Well! you go your ways, Gavin. I'll just be dandering on and have a look at the crops. I'm thinking of having a roup (sale). So we'll have a look at the growing corn. It's a bonnie sight."

Smiling broadly they looked into each other's eyes, with deep and perfect understanding. In the same moment, someone appeared rounding a bend in the distance.

"Joy be wi' ye, Gavin," said Burns, still smiling, and silently as a shadow he slipped back among the hedgerows.

The bay got its head, and once more its firm, sharp hoofbeats rang on the crisp air as though the world were made for gaiety. But Gavin was full of thought.

"Ah! Robin, Robin," he sighed. "Thou wast not made for gin-horse prudence; but will bountiful Heaven never make thee a little wise for thine own sake?"

Perhaps, he reflected, worldly wisdom was never the

mark of the singing tribe. Certainly Robin was no Solomon in his own affairs. Gavin thought of his friend's inherent worth, his noble attributes of head and heart, and his bosom swelled in pity, affection and boundless admiration. He thought too of the poet's dawning genius, a glorious sunrise rich in promise of splendours to come. No, there was no doubt about the poet; but what about the man?

Burns was going away, far beyond the bounds of Scotland. He would cross wide seas, his skies would change; but he would still be Burns. Heaven-born gifts and their alloy; giant strength, superb powers, and alas! the demon of passion. The present trouble would blow over and be forgotten, like the toothache, like a squall of sleet and hail in one's face. But Robin would remain: Mr. Hamilton recalled his favourite Horace, the sleek, Roman epicurean who knew men so well and judged so shrewdly; and what did he say? Cast out human nature with a pitchfork and it will return. There lay the peril for the brilliant, headlong, sociable, ever-lovable Robin.

CHAPTER 4

AS BURNS unexpectedly discovered the deed of vengeance was to be as secret as it was sudden; but by noon gossips were busy with the news that the beagles of the law were unleashed, and that the quarry had bolted for cover like a startled fox. After the first pleasing shock, men made a jocose jest of it at street corners, chortled as over a delicious bit of comic drama and laid bets on the probable issue of the hunt. But the ladies, with more vim or less diffidence, promptly suspended their housekeeping and gathered in clamorous, eruptive groups about open doors to explore the sensation and pass appropriate judgment on all concerned.

In truth, it was very particularly a woman's affair. Wherefore they discussed it pungently and with understanding, as a matter most closely touching the honour, safety, privileges, prerogatives, liberties, and general status of the sex. Some, well past the danger zone, were for measures which would strike terror into all predatory evil doers. Tar and feathers would not meet the case. Others, not yet beyond the riot of youthful passion and heady romance, would temper justice with mercy. A few, a bold, brazen few, even dared to hint sympathy and admiration. What was the transgressor's sin? An extra dash of hot primitive human nature, a trifling overhaste in love. Were these unpardonable crimes? If so, then, losh! who was safe? Or could one steal a horse and get away with it, while another durst not so much as look over the hedge?

The censors sniffed with righteous uplifted noses. Daddy Auld and the Kirk Session would have something to say to *that*, when the time came for the cutty stool, otherwise the stool of shame and repentance designed by an avenging church for incontinent sinners.

"Cutty stool," laughed one, who was well known to have wide and varied experience of the dark, deep ways of men. "Hi, hi! Rob Mossziel snoovin' awa afore the Session and hingin' his head on a cutty stool. My faith, that'll be a sicht."

"It'll be a warnin'," retorted a lemon-faced woman, who led the chorus of condemnation.

"Warnin'," trilled the other ironically, "warnin' quo she. Fegs but it's fine at the preachin' we are, as the monkey said to the man that scolded it for thievin'. After a' Robin's in grand company. Kings and princes, nae less, no to speak o' Kirk Elders and other decent respectable folk. And if ye ask me kimmers, which o' us does na like to dance promisky whiles? I'm jalousin' that deep doon in a wee corner o' her heart ilka ane o' us kind o' likes the like o' Robin."

"Speak for yersel, Nancy," snorted the lemon-faced woman.

"And for you, too, Tibbie, dear, if you're no owre prood," rejoined Nancy sweetly. "Ance upon a time —— But there, I'm no' castin' up. Lord kens we've a' oor bits o' things that's no' just fit for makin' a sang about in the market place."

And she trilled again, her mocking eyes wickedly alight with mischief.

Of a sudden the babbling was hushed to a tense, intent silence of watching. "See, see." Someone whispered excitedly, indicating with a jerk of the head a house in the Cowgate, a narrow alley just over the way. Immediately all eyes were upon it. At a tiny attic window a face appeared, a girlish face white with fear and horror. Instantly it withdrew, but the glimpse was vivid as lightning. Tibbie of the lemon-face nodded fatefully.

"Jean," she said, on a sougning breath. "Jean."

"Hidin'," observed another.

"As if dimity curtains could hide what's no' to be hid," said Tibbie with a snap.

"Poor lass!" came in a murmur of compassion. Again Nancy's ironic laugh broke in.

"And what for 'poor lass?' " she scoffed. "Maybe she'd be tellin' ye to keep your pity for them that needs it. Ay, and wha kens?" with a withering glance at the sere and yellow Tibbie, "she might be sayin' too it's easy bein' good when aiblins you're nae temptation. Anyway she's no negleckit and that's aye comfortin'."

A bitter retort sprang to Tibbie's acid tongue; but the words were stayed on her lips. A man coming down the street all at once arrested attention, a man walking with the stride of fury, his face grim and set as for an execution. The ladies heard him hailed in a high voice, not without a taunting note.

"Great doins the day, James."

He growled and was passing on.

"Are ye like to catch him, d'ye think?" another called, winking at his companions. "Hae ye looket into Johnny Doo's back parlor, or maybe auld Nance Tinnock has him whippit oot o' sicht among the blankets. I'd be givin her a ca'."

James swung on his heel, his face a furnace of rage.

"Thank 'ee for speirin'," he said, fairly hissing the words. "It's by ordinar civil."

"Nae hairm done, James, nae hairm done," he was told. "We couldna help wonderin', that's a'. It's no' every day the like o' this happens. What we've been thinkin' is that he's got the start o' ye, and may jouk and get awa'. Like as not he'll just lauch and make a rhyme o't."

James stood glaring, his mouth twitching, his face livid.

"Did ye ever hear tell o' Job and his three friends?" he enquired, smothering wrath in sarcasm. "He telt them they were the people and wisdom would die with them."

God! he was wrong. Wisdom is in full blast this minute here in this very toon o' Mauchline." And turning savagely he strode off.

"Jamie's het on the business," observed one.

"Jamie's a duvil when he's raised," added a second.

"There'll be mair o' this, as the Highland man said when he sharpened his dirk," supplemented a third. "Just see the step o' him."

They watched him sweep like a tornado into the Cowgate and advance upon his own house as if taking it by storm.

He was James Armour, father of the hapless Jean, and just then seething with the passion of revenge. For Jean had played the fool, grossly, shamefully, with an idle, graceless, penniless loon of a rhymster. A poet, a bard, the sweet singer of Coila, people said. A blackguard, snorted Mr. Armour, a ramping, predatory villain, openly devoted to sin, a lineal descendant of Eve's seducer in Eden. Jean, to her eternal shame, had allowed herself to be lured into his felon snare. Well! she should smart for her folly as he should pay for his villainy.

It was by no means the disgrace, actual or potential, that galled and envenomed him. Sideslips from the straight path of rectitude were human; in and around Mauchline they were as regular as seed time and harvest, and a great deal more frequent. The bar-sinister was nothing to make a moan about. Far seeing men, aware of the frailty of human nature, had devised ways and means for setting erring footsteps right again. A little penance to purge the soul, an admonition, a humble and contrite promise of amendment, and the white-washed delinquent was once more respectable. Many a black sheep was thus made white as snow, chaste as ice, and lived long a devout and honoured member of the community. For that matter Mr. Armour himself had once been young and hot-blooded.

Yes, if a false step were all he could bear the visitation

with Christian fortitude, hold up his head with the best of his neighbours, most of whom had their own small misfortunes to ignore and forget. But this black-avised profligate was not only without a rag of virtue; but what was worse, far worse, without a groat to his name. And was an ungodly trick of stringing ribald rhymes likely to fill his purse? "Fr-rup," snorted Mr. Armour in raging contempt. "Fr-rup!"

Yet in face of a reputation which ought to sink him in the sea with shame, the fellow had the effrontery to present Jean with a "writing" purporting to make her his lawful, wedded wife. A fine son-in-law for a provident, ambitious, God-fearing Master-Mason. "Fr-rup," repeated Mr. Armour, with concentrated savagery. "Fr-rup." By Heaven it should not be, not if Jean went for ever unwedded.

It made the situation blacker that the miscreant was trying to escape the consequences of his crimes by bolting to Jamaica, aided and abetted, it was said, by that arch plotter, the lawyer, Gavin Hamilton. But they forgot, ha, ha, they forgot, that there were jails in the land.

With the energy of surging rage he bounced into the house. "Jean!" he shouted in a voice that made walls and rafters ring. "Jean!" and there being no response yet again and still more peremptorily, "Jean!"

This time a "Yes, father" came falteringly from somewhere above.

"Come here at once," he ordered. "Quick."

She descended the steep, narrow, ill-lighted stairs, quaking so that she could scarcely walk or breathe. At the foot she halted, trying to read his face and her own fate. He pointed imperatively to a door at the rear.

"Get in there and bide till your mother and me come to you."

She obeyed without a word. All her power of resistance or opposition was beaten down. Besides words would but exasperate, and there was a paralyzing pain in her throat.

In the room were three wooden chairs and a settle with rude carvings, all the work of Mr. Armour's own hands, for he was a handy as well as a provident householder. Dropping on the settle, she bent forward, her face buried in her hands. She did not weep. All her tears, she felt, were shed, leaving the source parched and smarting, as from living fire.

At the sound of footsteps, she started to her feet. Her father and mother entered, grim, condemnatory, unrelenting. Far down a faint hope had fluttered in her heart; at sight of their faces it died. No mercy in those hard, fierce eyes and looks.

"You have the paper?" said her father, in a voice that was as a thunder-clap. For a moment the courage of despair flamed up in her breast, the courage which may turn a weak woman into a tigress.

"Oh! father! must you take it from me?" The cry was the cry of anguish in the last extremity of desperation.

"Take it from you? Are you at that again? You promised to give it up as soon as I got a warrant out to catch him."

Every atom of blood went from her face.

"It—is—out then?"

He nodded, his mouth tight, as a shut trap.

"And—and they're—after him?" she could scarcely articulate.

Her voice sounded hollow and far off, like a smothered cry rising from some unfathomable depth.

"After him? By this time, I hope, they have him by the heels. I'll learn him—and you, too. Out with the paper."

She hesitated, panting as in agony.

"Do as your father bids you," ordered her mother sternly.

For a moment she reeled, as if fainting. Her breath

came in hoarse gasps that seemed to tear her throat and chest. Of a sudden cold beads gleamed on her forehead.

"Oh! let me die," she moaned. "Let me die."

"I'd a thousand times rather see you dead than married to him," was the harsh retort. "Come, out with the paper. You have it, I suppose?"

She gazed at him piteously.

"Must you have it?"

"Must I have it? Wasting more breath on that. I tell you again, out with it. You know your promise."

She put a hand to her head, as if to ease an excruciating pain.

"I wasn't myself when I made it."

"Wasn't yourself! All the more reason for being done with it. Give me the paper—at once."

Slowly, uncertainly, as one utterly dazed, she put a hand into the bosom of her dress, paused, withdrew it, as if bitten by an adder, and stood mute and motionless.

"Can't you do as you're told," her mother cried angrily. "You're not going to tell us you're fond of that—that man," and as Jean, still speechless, hung her head—"I—I believe she's fond of him, I believe she is. Oh! mercy on us, that I should live to see a dochter o' mine ownin' to *that*."

In his gluttonous rage, Mr. Armour paid no heed.

"Are you going to give me the paper, or must I take it?" he demanded, his looks more menacing than his words.

Like one who forever renounces hope and happiness by surrendering what is dearest in life, Jean again put her hand into her bosom, fumbled, hesitated, looked at her father as in a last anguished appeal; and then with a jerk produced a folded sheet of paper. It was the "writing" which, according to Scots law, made her "an honest woman." With a vicious dart her father snatched it from her hand.

"Ah!" he panted. "Ah! now we'll see."

He unfolded the sheet, displaying a signature written conspicuously at the bottom:

Robt. Burns

A moment he gazed at the paper as a man might gaze at his deadliest enemy prostrate before him; then he made to tear it; but changing his mind, he held it out to Jean. With her own hand she should perform the act of destruction.

"Tear off that name," he ordered. And as once more she seemed to hesitate, "Tear it off, I say, and be quick about it."

"You'll better, my lass," her mother warned sharply.

Dazed, hypnotized, acting like an automaton she obeyed, her hand shaking as with palsy.

"There, that's so much," her father panted, as one should say, "I've got him on the hip." "Now, here's a punk. Make the thing into ashes."

Producing a box, he struck a sulphur match, as large as a pen-handle, and held it over the grate. "Now then, quick."

Half blind, her head whirling, she held the scrap of paper to the blue pungent flame; next moment it was white ash. The remainder he crumpled up and burned himself.

"There, that's done," he said, lifting a countenance crimson with passion and exultation. "Now," turning to the shaking Jean. "Upstairs with you till—till we see what's to be done with you."

CHAPTER 5

MEANWHILE the appearance of the Law, in the person of the Parish Constable, caused a commotion at Mossgiel. Early in the forenoon Isabel, aged fifteen, came upon him sniffing and prying, she was sure, with evil intent. He saluted her pleasantly; but that of course was just his craft, his wicked, foxy cunning meant to inveigle her for his own nefarious ends. She was not to be caught. So, instead of staying to answer impertinent questions, she took him to her mother, then busily engaged churning in the little dairy behind the byre. The rest of the family were about their various duties. Agnes, as cook and house-keeper, was within; Gilbert and Annabel were at work in the fields.

"Gude mornin', Mistress Burness," said the officer, as the hostile, watchful Isabel felt, with deceptive politeness.

"Gude morn'," responded Mrs. Burness, momentarily, suspending operations. "It's early afit ye are."

She spoke the full flavoured, broad Ayrshire doric, which, indeed, was the only language she knew. Her eye fell on Isabel who stood by staring half in fear, half in resentment.

"Run awa, lassie, to yer kye. They'll be rampaigin' in the young clover and maybe gien themsels a pain. They're that bothersome," she explained to the visitor, "ye just widna believe." He smiled amiably.

"Ay, beasts are unco bothersome things. Amaist as bad as fowk," he added, with a twinkle meant to be friendly and confidential. Despite Isabel's dark suspicions, he was in truth the mildest mannered constable who ever ran a criminal to earth; and for a variety of reasons, his present duty lay heavily on his mind.

"'Deed an' that's true," she assented. "In a' the wide

world there's naething queerer than fowk—if it be na kirns."

She turned to her churn and resumed plunging, with a look of concentrated determination.

"Will ye be wantin' anything pertickler?" she asked, over her shoulder.

He cleared his throat uneasily. For the widow of his old friend, William Burness, a man of sterling worth, he had a profound admiration and respect. A true heroine, he reckoned her, sorely handicapped by misfortune, yet making a brave, a very brave, fight. He regarded her now with sentiments strangely at variance with his office. She was so active, cheerful, compact and competent, so neat and tidy, with her ruddy hair just showing a tinge of grey, and her vivacious dark eyes, that kindled so readily with fun or kindness. And she was the mother of Robert Burns, a delightful, most engaging fellow, full of gifts and graces—if only he could keep out of scrapes with the lasses.

"Does Robin happen to be aboot this mornin'," he asked, with a studiously casual air.

"Na, I'm feart Robin's no' aboot," she answered, with an equally casual air. "Hech! but kirnin's kittle wark. Puts a body oot o' breeth. Whit like did ye want wi' him?"

The churning went on vigorously, plup, plup; plup, plup, splashing her bare arms.

"It's gatherin', Mistress Burness," he observed with eager interest. "Ay, for sure it's gatherin'. Ye'll be feenished in nae time. Robin's no' at hame, ye say?"

"That's what I said." Plup, plup; plup, plup. "When he comes in I'll tell him ye was speirin' for him. Whit'll I say ye wanted?"

He coughed awkwardly. "Oh! just a wee bit private business atween me and him. He'll ken. You're kind o' sure he's no' aboot, Mistress Burness?"

"I'm no' on my Bible oath. Look for yersel." And she bent with redoubled vigor to her task.

He watched her a minute labouring, as was too manifest, beyond her strength; then on a sudden manly impulse, he intervened.

"Far owre sair that for you, Mistress Burness. Let me hae a turn at it."

She stopped, her hand to her side, pretending to laugh.

"You? Losh! that would be a tale to tell, ay and a sight to see. It splashes. Ye'd get yer fine claes fyled, and you an officer o' the pairish."

"Hoots," he cried, with the zest of one thirsting for adventure. "Hoots! Hae ye a bit bib handy?"

She had. With nimble fingers she swathed him in an apron as large as a bed-sheet, pinning it firmly over a portly stomach. He was a large man, size had aided him in getting his post, and of late he had been steadily expanding in the region of the waist. With comic bravado he seized the upright handle and began to plunge as to the manner born.

"Brocht up on a fairm," he remarked gleefully. "It's like bein' young again."

"Ye've got the knack o't," she commented approvingly. "Only a wee thocht slower and a great deal langer in the stroke. Ye see it's settin'. There, that's it, that's it. Fegs, it's feein' ye for the dairy, I'll be," and they laughed together.

Presently he paused, a trifle blown; she lifted the lid, and both peered down, savouring the delicious creamy flavour, their heads almost touching.

"Fine," she said succinctly. "Fine. Nae evil eye this time, thwartin' a body's toil and trouble. Whiles it just winna come."

"The evil eye's a terror," he observed with conviction, for superstition was still rank in the land. "Blight's a' thing it's turned on."

She shut down the lid and he resumed work on the general direction, "Slow and steady; slow and steady." In a few minutes her ear caught the familiar sound of solid matter swishing in liquid.

"Noo," she said hastily. "I'll just take it mysel. Thank ye kindly."

She gave half a dozen long cautious strokes, peeped in, and gave a few more. Then she washed her hands in a basin kept handy for the purpose, and lifting off the lid, thrust her right arm deep down into the frothy, foaming mixture. Next moment she held up a handful of white dripping butter. He sniffed delectably.

"Gosh, it smells good, Mistress Burness."

"No just ready for the table," she returned. "Needs washin' and pressin' and a' that. But hae a drink."

Suiting the action to the word, she dipped a large pewter mug, and he drank as if the gods had suddenly opened a fountain of nectar.

"That's the stuff," he cried, taking breath. "That's the stuff for certain. Better than a' the penny wheep in the land."

"Or the ti'penny either," came the emphatic response. "If fowk minded the kirn and let the ale hoose abe it would be better for them. A drap mair?"

He drank again, deep as any toper; then, wiping his mouth, he suddenly remembered his mission.

"Weel, I'll hae to be off," he said, divesting himself of the apron. "Ye micht just tell Robin I lookit in in the go by, Mistress Burness." Then with a meaning smile, "And there's nae need to be lettin' on that the pairish constable was takin' a hand at the kirnin'."

And understanding Mrs. Burness smiled gratefully.

As he went out he met the field-workers coming in for their midday dinner of "chappit tatties" (mashed potatoes) and fresh buttermilk, a frugal, easily prepared meal, as healthful as it was savoursome. He greeted them like a

trusted friend, and in the same spirit they returned his greeting.

All, except Isabel, well knew, however, what his visit meant. But they were not a talkative family, save when Robin was about with his quips and cranks, his lively sallies and irrepressible wit to divert and kindle and animate. So they talked little of this fresh calamity, fallen like a thunderbolt, to shatter their lives. For one moment, indeed, Annabel permitted herself a spurt of fiery anger.

"It is Jean's own fault," she declared hotly. "She just threw herself at Robin's head. What could they expect?" With the confident wisdom of two and twenty, Annabel fancied she perfectly understood all such delicate and dangerous matters.

"Ay," agreed her mother. "A lass should never throw herself at a man's head. Shame is sure to come o't." That was all.

That was a long, long day for the mistress of Moss-giel; and the tasks, in general so cheerily got through, were grievously burdensome. But at last the weary day's toil was done. The blessed gloaming came, softening all natural harshness, suffusing the world with a mystic tranquil light, bathing the spirit in a hallowed peace. Ah! if in reality the bruised and aching spirit could be so bathed and cooled and healed; if the beating brain and the torturing thoughts could be soothed and quieted! Where was the medicine that would cure the anguish of a breaking heart?

Late at night, when, as she hoped, her little household was fast asleep, she stood a lonely, forlorn figure by her hosedoor, gazing forth upon the darkling scene. It was still as the grave. In a dark clear sky clusters of stars burned brilliantly. Presently the moon would rise, the old, ever young moon that had lighted so many generations of people on their devious, troubled ways. Where would it light *him*? The watcher thought of a

familiar Scots proverb, "E'enin' brings a' hame." Alas! there was one whom evening would not bring home that night. Yet she could not help expecting him to steal out of the darkness and come to her for succour. Like one whom his mother comforteth. Who could or should comfort a man in time of trouble, if not his mother? And the worse he slipped and fell, surely—surely he needed her the more. Robin, her Robin, the gay, brilliant, affectionate boy she had dandled on her knee, the babe to whom she had given suck. Yes, hers, hers doubly now that misfortune had him in its grip.

Turning abruptly, she quietly shut and bolted the door, though it was like locking *him* out, and crept up to the tiny box-like bedroom at the "stair-head." Entering with the same caution and quietness, she lighted a candle. In her bed a baby girl was sweetly asleep, her small red lips pouted in a smile, as though fairy fingers were gently tickling her. Mrs. Burness bent over the chubby, dimpled face. His child.

"Like Robin," she murmured. "Like Robin."

Tears rushed to her eyes, the tears that were so hard to keep back in the presence of others, the tears that very nearly dropped into the buttermilk when she jested with the parish constable.

Her thoughts flew back to Robin's father. Thank God he was spared this—this visitation. Yet he had had his fears, his misgivings. When his time came and his children were called in to receive his last blessing, he had whispered weakly and painfully. "I am afraid for one of you." And Robin, quick to understand, bowed himself in grief.

"For me, father." The dying man put out a hand and let it rest on the bowed head.

"Oh! my son," he breathed, and they were almost his last words. "As you honour your God and love me, be—be good. Oh! my dear, be good. Pray for grace and strength." He paused for breath; she could never forget

it. Then, as if rallying himself for a last great effort. "Put—put the curb on yourself, tight, tight—always."

And kneeling, wet-eyed, Robin gave his solemn promise. But oh! the weakness, the blindness of human nature when Satan spread his snares. In the midst of temptation, Robin forgot his promise. For all that he was a dear, dutiful son, generous, considerate, gentle, save when he took her in his strong arms and swung and whirled her till she was breathless and giddy. A blithe, high-spirited, warm-hearted, affectionate boy. And so clever, people said. They told her she ought to be proud of him; and she was proud of him, far, far prouder than she had words to say. Were all the high gifts, of which good judges talked so much, to go for nothing or were they given as a curse? Surely, surely God in his mercy had other purposes for her beloved.

The child stirred, turned in her sleep, and held out a tiny, rosy hand, as it seemed, beseechingly. Seizing it impulsively, she dropped to her knees, burying her face in the bedclothes. Then, still holding the soft, baby hand, she prayed as only a mother prays for the son of her love. It was all she could do to help.

Agnes, lying awake on the other side of a wooden partition, hearkened, with bated breath, to a sobbing, pleading voice, that faltered and broke, went on in an agony of earnestness, and again faltered and broke.

It was more than Agnes could bear. Trembling, wet-eyed, with a great pain at her heart, she slid down quickly and drew the bedclothes tight over her head.

CHAPTER 6

ABOUT the same hour, James Allan, labourer of Donald, and his wife, were resting a moment after family prayers in their cottage in Old Rome Forest, a tiny cluster of thatched houses, near Kilmarnock. The place was named by some satiric humourist on the score, seemingly, that there was no forest nor any legend or tradition connecting it with Rome. The weary, toil-worn pair were just ready for bed when there came a soft, furtive tapping on the bottle-glazed window.

"Gudeness! whit's that?" gasped Mrs. Allan, starting up on her stool, with a cold thrill of the spine.

They listened. It came again, a little louder, but still furtive.

"Let's see," said James, pricking up courage.

With an eerie sensation both went to the door, half expecting to be confronted by some uncanny visitant. In the dim light, they were met by a solid, stalwart figure, which in no sense whatever suggested the supernatural.

"Lord sake! Robin," cried the lady. "How ye've brocht my heart loupin' into my mooth. I thocht it was a bogle. Whit brings ye at siccan a time in siccan a way?"

She was Robin's aunt, his mother's half-sister, a kindly woman, noted for her piety, ignorance, and superstition. He laughed, a trifle wryly.

"Looking for lodgings, Auntie—if they're to be had."

"Lodgings," she echoed. "Mercy on us, whit's gane wrang wi' Mossziel. Hae ye gane and fa'en oot wi' them?"

"He'll better come inside and tell us," put in James, remembering the claims of blood and hospitality. "It's cauld welcome standin' by the door-cheek. Come yer ways in by, Robin."

There was no light, not even a glimmer from the

hearth; but after an excited hunt for "spunks," Mrs. Allan lighted a home-made tallow candle, which she set in the chipped neck of a bottle. This made the darkness a little more visible. That done, she looked enquiringly at her nephew.

"Ye've been trampin', be the look o' ye," she observed. "Ye'll be hungry."

A portion of the sowens, a concoction of the ground husks of oats boiled to the consistency of porridge, remained from supper. But as that would be no fare for a visitor with some pretentions to style, she got out some oat-cakes and barley bannocks left over from Sunday. There was no butter, but a "kebbock" of fresh cheese and a jug of whey, no thinner or sourer than penny wheep, might serve for a hungry man.

"It's a' I hae, Robin," she said apologetically.

"A feast," quoth Robin, falling to with the appetite of the famished. He had eaten nothing since the dawn, and little enough then.

Having supped, he satisfied curiosity by telling frankly what was afoot. They gasped. Moreover he took care to point out that as the law stood, they ran some risk by sheltering him. If they were afraid, he would just slip back into the night. Afraid? James Allan scorned the idea. But what was James Armour thinking of? Had he gone gyte to be dragging his own in the mire in public?

"It's an ill bird that fyles its ain nest," commented Mrs. Allan.

Pending developments, Robin was welcome to such accommodation as they could offer. Their boy, Sandy,* had the bed in the "ben-room." Robin could share it if he liked. Their own bed was the closed off box in the kitchen. Above there was but the semblance of a loft, fit for nothing. Robin smilingly explained that in view of possible

* Alexander Allan, bred a shoemaker, turned sailor, commanded an Atlantic brig, and became founder of the Allan Line of steamships.

emergencies, it would be well for him to "lie light." Therefore, as a compromise a shake-down was laid against the door; it consisted of an old chaff mattress below, a blanket and an ancient topcoat above.

"Don't be surprised if you find the bird flown in the morning," he warned them. "And I'll see to the sneck."

They nodded with understanding. Then James remembered something.

"I'm telt yer for gien us a book in gude black prent," he said. "Johnny Wilson says it's like to breed a splore. Ye'll no' hae ony o' the bits o' poetry on ye?"

Robin had not; but his memory was well stored, and at James's request, he repeated snatches of a choicely satiric kind. James chortled man-like, but his wife was horrified.

"Robin," she cried, "yer no' for prentin' that?"

"As sure as print is print, Auntie," replied Robin. "So you see it's just as well I am clearing out of Scotland."

"Na, na, my dear," she pleaded. "Ye'll no' prent that. It's ungodly. They'll be doon on ye, they'll be doon on ye withoot mercy." He smiled.

"They're doon on me now."

"And they'll be waur gif ye prent that," she rejoined, horror in every feature of her face. "My dear, I'm feart for ye; I'm feart for ye, Robin."

He rose and put an arm about her.

"Sweet sleep, Auntie, and forget you've such a thing as a scapegrace nephew, who writes ungodly rhymes. And now to bed, to await what may betide," he added under his breath.

A week passed, ten days, a fortnight, and still the fugitive was at large. He had quitted Old Rome Forest, partly because he would not embroil innocent, hospitable people; partly for other and politic reasons. Rumour, following like a sleuthhound, had him here and there and

yonder at the same time—drinking with Robbie Muir, Wine Merchant, Kilmarnock, a gay blade exactly after his own heart; calmly correcting proofs in Johnny Wilson's printing office, ay, and actually writing more poetry, lampoons probably on his pursuers; passing the time jovially with Wee Jamie Smith, the draper in the very heart of Mauchline. Even Mossgiel knew him, it was whispered, at unsuspected hours.

He was everywhere simultaneously, like Boyle Roche's bird, everywhere, that is to say, except where the parish constable happened to be. In his rounds that harassed officer was the object of much mirth and many taunts which he bore with a friendly, patient grin. The mockers did not know, and he gave no hint that strictly *sub rosa* he ventured to place certain salient facts in the situation before the irate James Armour.

"They're just lauchin' at us," he told Mr. Armour. "It's the joke o' the countryside. 'Hae ye no' grippit him yet'? they ask me, mockin' like. 'Is he goin' to jouk the lot o' ye?' And they snicker and wink. The truth is, Maister Armour, he's sic a favourite, he has only to show his face, and there's bite and sup and bed for him, and naebody the wiser. If I'm huntin' in Mauchline, he's in Tarbolton; when I make for Tarbolton, he's in Kilmarnock; when I'm sure o' catchin' him in Kilmarnock, dod he's up some back stair in Ochiltree or Ayr—withoot an eye seein' him. That's the mystery. Catchin' him's like puttin' saut on a bird's tail. Faith it's waur. Ye can see the bird, but deil a hair o' him's to be seen, high or low."

"The more need to push," said Mr. Armour curtly.

"Ay, ay, I ken that. Naebody can learn me my business. But if ye was to ask me, Maister Armour, private and confedential like atween oorselves, I'd say I'm misdootin' the job, lock, stock, and barrel, as the Irishman dooted his gun."

"What makes you think like that?" demanded Mr. Armour sharply.

"Toots," was the knowing reply, "whiles the eyes see and the ears hear mair than the tongue well daur tell. Then there's the Sheriff."

"What about him?" came yet more sharply.

"Weel! says he to me in his fine English—he was at the Glasgow coallege and got it there or fegs it micht hae been Aiberdeen or Edinbury, I'm no' sure."

"Anyway he got it," interpolated Mr. Armour impatiently. "That's enough. He got it."

"Ay, nae doot aboot that, he got it. A fine man is the Sheriff. Talks like a book; and says he to me, 'It's big game we're hunting this time, officer!' He aye gies me my title. 'Robert Burns is a remarkable man, a very remarkable man, the most extraordinary man I have ever met in the whole course of my life, and I have met a few big guns.' That's how he put it. There's the Sheriff for ye."

"Gavin Hamilton put him up to that," snapped Mr. Armour. "They're as thick as thieves."

"Ay, and he said mair than that," pursued the constable, ignoring the interruption and its implication. 'A poet too,' says he. 'A real, true blue, first class, high-water mark poet. Nature's masterpiece and darling.' 'I thought it was woman, sir,' says I. He gied a wee kinkle o' a laugh; ye ken his way. 'Woman, bless her, is all right in her place,' says he, 'very beautiful and attractive and good, when she happens to be so. Without her none of us would be here, unless old mother Nature found out some other way of doing things. And it's because Burns loves the sex a thought too impetuously,' that was his very word, 'that we're after him now. There are ways and ways of loving a lass, some according to law and some not. Burns's way, as it happens, is not just strictly legal by our code. But we'd better mind,' says he, wi' a droll look, ye

ken how he can make a face. 'We'd better mind that he does not turn and make a laughing stock of us to the world at large. Satire! My word, he beats Dryden and Pope hollow at their own game.' Noo who were they?"

"I don't know," answered Mr. Armour testily. "Some fool rhymers likely. As for the Sheriff and his fine screed, he's got a duty to do. So have you."

"Well and truly, according to statute," agreed the constable promptly. "The Sheriff's no' the man to shirk. He'd clap his ain son in jyle in two twos. So would his officer. Here's the warrant," clapping his breast pocket, "and the jyle's just roond the corner. As the Sheriff said to me, 'Genius or no genius, every mother's son is subject to the laws of his country.' So ye see, Maister Armour, it's for you as pursuer and prosecutor to say if ye want the thing pushed." The tone was as one should say, "I'm warning you. Your blood be upon your own head." Mr. Armour clenched his lips.

"Ay, it's for me to say. And this is my word to you. Keep at him, grip him. And you may tell the Sheriff I'm not playing at bools."

But going his way grimly he was assailed by doubts and misgivings. Relent? Never, *never*. But had his rage, his just and righteous desire for vengeance hurried him into courses that might appear vindictive, or worse, ridiculous?

"They're just lauchin' at us," he repeated to himself, squirming a little inwardly. The atmosphere was not so much hostile as—as—oh! dammit! what was it? Scornful, sneery, mocking. And while he went about with hot gills, the fugitive, the felon, was faring like a prince on a pleasure excursion. What use was the law anyway? Damn the old fool of a Sheriff, with his fine words, and doubly damn the gabbling constable. He would make both rue their slackness, their favouritism, ay, their favouritism.

Fortunately he had keen supporters. Thus, the Rev. Mr. Auld adjured him by all that was just and holy to deal drastically with the carnally minded offender; and Mrs. Armour's hot counsel was to lay on and spare not. In her presence and under the incitement of her wrath, he was resolute; away from her and subjected to taunts and grins and innuendoes, he had to own that his resolution faltered. There were times indeed when it seemed easier to bear wrong than ridicule. Moreover—and here was a question of immense practical importance—could he as a master-mason dependent on the good will of the people, afford to gratify his revenge at the expense of his pocket? Ah! he must think of that. Last and far from least, there was Jean with her white woebegone face, dumbly pleading, pleading—a melting, unmanning sight. His own flesh and blood; so young, too, twenty on her last birthday.

In truth Jean was the real, the crucial problem. Early in the year when scandal breathed on her name, James Lambie, scout and moral policeman for Mr. Auld, was deputed to hold a searching enquiry, in private. That done (with consuming zeal) he reported to the Kirk Session that he had “duly questioned Mary Smith, wife to James Armour anent the condition of her daughter, Jean”; and was assured (with a spice of resentment, it may be assumed) that all was well and proper. Jean was going off on a visit to a douce, worthy couple in Paisley, to wit, James Purdie, a carpenter, and his wife. She went. When she returned, after an absence of several months, the ghastly truth was out. On hearing it, he swooned in his wife's arms. Then, in a wild reaction, a blind and head-long fury, he went out to seek revenge. The warrant was the result. He had not stayed to think. Thought and rage do not go together.

It incensed him the more that in spite of her tragic lesson, Jean was still under the devilish spell of her accomplice in guilt. Praise him, openly defend him she dared

not; but by a hundred signs and symptoms, it was clear how her heart spoke. Indeed, Mr. Armour had given strict orders that she was to be watched, lest she might steal off to the rascal and plunge into yet deeper shame. Such was the maddening, fathomless folly of woman.

CHAPTER 7

THEY were right who said that Rob Mossgiel seemed to be little hampered or embarrassed by the attentions of the Law. At the very moment when the parish constable was unburdening himself to James Armour, the runaway was seated on a stool in the back part of John Wilson's printing office in Kilmarnock, pouring out his heart in two passionate lyrics, composed in an anguish of longing and regret during a lonely walk under the stars: "Will ye go to the Indies, My Mary?" and tenderer, more fervid still—"My Highland Lassie, O." Chancing to look in his direction, Mr. Wilson saw him suddenly bow his head over the manuscript, and could have sworn that the bent shoulders shook as with a smothered sob. But next instant they were squared, and Mr. Wilson heard himself called lustily:

"Hey, Johnny, something more for the bit bookie."

He responded with alacrity, the occasion being exceptional and interesting. He was a lithe, active little man with a rosy cherubic face, small bright eyes, and the pert alertness of a bird.

"Wha's the lassie, Mossgiel?" he enquired, looking up from the first sheet. Burns laughed good-humouredly.

"Lord save us, man, must a poet's flame always be common flesh and blood, clad in wincey? Grant him a little licence in giving to airy nothings a local habitation and a name." Mr. Wilson was the wale of good fellows; but in the circumstances not a chosen repository for secrets.

"Sounds unco real like," he said, reading again. "And a Highland ane, too. I never kent ye went trapeezin' round wi' Highland wenches. I'm telt they're bonnie enough, some of them, till they get kippered and yellow wi' peat reek."

Burns looked down on the little man, his eyes twinkling quizzically.

"Has it ever been your lot to dream dreams and see visions, Johnny?" he asked.

"Oh! ay," replied Johnny. "Whiles I hae my bits o' dreams, like other folk. But visions, no never, if I'm anyway sober."

"Stick to that," said Burns. "You speak of reality. When blind John Milton described that little fracas in Heaven, do you think he did it from personal knowledge of the scene and place?"

"I'd be thinkin' it's no' likely," answered John, feeling that he must bear with the whims and fantasies of a poet. "That would be an airy nothing, as ye ca' it, a kind o' poetic lee made up out of his own head. Weel! this 'll do fine for the book. Kind o' sets off the bits where the fun runs wild. Last night readin' them to mysel I nearly split. But, losh! Mossziel we'll get our fairin' for this—me for prenting the thing and you for writing it."

"Depend upon it, they'll roast us like herring, if they get the chance," Burns assured him soothingly. "You see their wrath is like the burning bush of Scripture—it lowes and is nane the waur."

John grinned. "Dod! that's a new view o' the Bible. Pass it on to your friends, Daddy Auld and Black Jock Russell of the roaring voice, as ye ca' him. I hear he was oot with a cudgel in Kilmarnock here last Lord's day, and that the hale street skedaddled wi' fright at sight of him. He's a leevin' terror. Weel!" returning to the business in hand, "Ye'll better let me hae a wheen mair bits just for appearance. Folk are that close and pernickity when they're asked for siller. They want bulk for their money, and if we dinna pad oot a bit, they'll be saying three shillings is high for a pickle rhymes. They're a' for size." "As if the granite was worth more than the gem,"

quoth Burns. "That's the idea," agreed John. "Well! I'm putting my best foot foremost in this Mossiel. A fine octavo, first class paper and print, wide margins, blue boards, a white label, and plenty of feeding, as ye might say."

He beamed self-appreciatively. "They're speirin' for the thing," he added for further stimulus. "And I tell them it's to be a braw, braw book. Some are for having your picture in it. 'The Bard of Coila at the plew-stilts' or something like that. Folk maun hae their joke."

"They're welcome—so long as we have their cash," laughed Burns, as John thought a trifle grimly. "Go ahead, you shall have all the rhymes you want, if I have to sit up o' nights wooing the unwilling muse."

"Never unwilling with you," responded John. "Ay ready to dance when you pipe. Now we'll just hae a gless for luck."

Burns was as good as his word. That night while his printer slept, he wrote, in strict seclusion, the "Epistle to a Young Friend," as though to prove how a poet, hunted and harried to the verge of insanity, could turn aside and set wisdom, wise as Solomon's, to lasting music. The inspiration came from no Socratic desire to preach, nor yet to supply John Wilson with copy. It came wholly from a maddening sense of error, a desperate eagerness to find some vent or opiate for feelings which were threatening the very seat of reason itself. Young Andrew, son of his "loved, much honoured, much respected" friend, Robert Aiken, was going forth into the world. Here were some golden precepts for the boy, the fruit of bitter experience, which might help him to avoid shipwreck on the rough seas of life, and at the same time ease a tortured mind. One truth, forced from him, stood out as in letters of fire:

If self the wavering balance shake,
It's rarely right adjusted.

Oh! that *self*, that tangled, complex, perverse, unaccountable, passion-tossed, passion-driven self. And he could be so wise and so foolish; so wise in counsel, so foolish in conduct. Others he could teach to steer a prudent course; himself must "run life's mad career, wild as the wave." "Quick to learn and wise to know," yet "owre fast for thought, owre hot for rule." His own satirist! What a fate.

But in the crash and wreck one thing was still left—his Pride, the pride of Lucifer. Again and again he had avowed, even vaunted an admiration for Milton's Satan. He, too, could be satanic in defiance and disdain. If the world is hostile, if it miscalls and maltreats you, why, fling the gage of battle in its face. Pride roused to fury is an Excalibur sword that cuts through a world of Gordian knots.

Next day he spent mostly with Robert Muir and John Wilson, sampling choice liquors and correcting and adding to proof sheets. He had thrown off all appearance of depression or fear or furtiveness. Openly as the provost himself, he went about Kilmarnock, with smiles for his friends and a curled lip for his foes.

In the evening after a jolly bumper with friends, he swung openly along the high road to Mossgiel, heedless whom he might meet. In truth he rather hoped for an encounter with his enemies or their legal minions. He met none who had not a friendly, if curious greeting. It was "Hoo's a wi' ye, Mossgiel?" or "Grand weather for the craps", or "When's the bit bookie comin' along?" or "When are ye for the Indies? We'll be missin' ye sair." Not a word of Armour or the parish constable.

As he drew near home, the dusk was falling, and on the evening stillness there floated to his ears the familiar sounds of a fiddle. "Old Scrape-the-gut earning a supper and a bed," he thought. "Poor soul, likely he needs both." A wave of sympathy came over him. There was no saying

what the malignity of Fate had in store for himself. Half in jest and very much in earnest he had written "The last o't, the worst o't is only but to beg."

In spite of the failing light, his mother, ever instinctively on the watch, spied him and without a word slipped away from the company within.

"Is it for bidin' ye are, Robin?" she asked, tremblingly, after the first exchange of affection. He put an arm about her.

"The prodigal returns," he laughed. "With the most prodigious appetite that ever a hungry man had. I hope the fatted calf is ready." Under cover of a smile, she drew a deep shivering breath of relief.

"That's good news, my dear. It's been a weary, weary time without ye, Robin. But a'll be weel noo that yer back." He smiled in return, half pityingly; but his words were cheerful.

"Am I not here as fit as that fiddle I hear? Music for the returned vagrant. Heartsome and jolly. Come, let us go in."

They entered like a pair of lovers, as indeed, they very much were. Instantly his sisters were upon Robin with cries of startled delight; but Gilbert, remembering Scots reticence, merely nodded, as though his brother had been absent but an hour or two on prosaic or trivial business. "A bit late," he remarked as an afterthought. "Though it's a fine night for being out."

Old Scrape-the-gut had ceased scraping and stood uncertainly looking from one to another.

"Weel! I'll better be off to my bed," he said, with delicate understanding. He had something important to tell, a message to deliver; but it would keep till morning. Burns, however, would not hear of his going. They must have a crack and maybe a spring or two on the fiddle.

"How's the world been using you this while, Benny?" he enquired kindly.

"Oh!" replied Benny, promptly dropping back into his corner of the settle. "As per usual. Whiles it lauchs at me and whiles it lauchs wi' me. That's as much as can be expeckit. But I just warstle awa. If there's nae sun the day there's aye hope o' a blink the morn's morn'. I just trust in Providence."

"The best of mainstays," said Burns. "By the way, have you had anything to eat?"

Yes. Benny had had his fill. "It's never an empty wame for Benny at Mossgiel," he said. "Thanks to the gude wife," and he bowed gallantly to Mrs. Burness.

They had a crack about many things, such a crack that the fiddle was laid aside and forgotten. Benny had much to tell for he was the newsman of three parishes, and most efficient in his calling. The yellowest of yellow journalists could have given him no tips in cooking news, or exploiting a sensation. For that reason he was ever a welcome visitor among the country folk.

But that night, there was one thing he omitted from the tide of his talk, though it was nearly out several times. Not till Burns was seeing him to bed in the barn, did he venture to broach the subject.

"Are ye tired, Mossgiel?" he asked. "If ye werena I thocht we micht hae a wee bit dander afore turnin' in. It's a temptin' nicht. Look at the stars. Are they no' blinkin' bonnily? Whiles I look up at them when I'm my lee lane and wonder and wonder and wonder, thinkin' o' a' they've seen and a' they're like to see lang, lang after my e'en are steekit (shut). But that's by the way," he broke off apologetically. "They never fash wi' me."

"Why, Benny," said Burns, on a queer little thrill, "you're a poet."

"Gae wa' wi' ye," returned Benny modestly. "If I had your brains something micht come o't. And that minds me. The countryside's expectin' great things o' the book. Johnny Wilson's dancin' wi' glee owre 't, I'm telt."

"Fatuous optimism," rejoined Burns, who had meagre expectations. "Ten to one it will be still-born." Then after a pause, "Fortune is not very kind to me at present, Benny."

"What gars ye say that?" Benny demanded. "Gin ye ask me, ye've only to haud up yer head at Kirk and market to be as good as the lave."

In the starlight, Burns could not see his face; but the tone was decidedly significant.

"What's behind that, Benny?"

Benny chuckled a full half minute before answering.

"What's behind it? I'm thinkin' there's never been sic a joke in the countryside before. It's splittin'. Baldy Whannel, an honest, decent man for a' he's pairish constable, could tell ye something aboot that. I wad a bawbee, it's a' I've got, ye havena set eyes on Baldy ance since the splore began."

"Now that you speak of it, not once," Burns admitted.

"There ye are," said Benny gleefully. "I'm thinkin' it's been kittle wark joukin' ye. A bonnie wee game o' hide and seek, wi' the seeker aye in the wrang place." And he laughed aloud. "Forgie me, Mossgiel, but it's owre comic."

"What is?" asked Burns, at once curious and mystified.

"Why," answered Benny, "only this that the dam fule Jamie Armour is findin' oot what a dam fule he is. Listen, Mossgiel, only this mornin' I was wi' Gavin Hamilton, and says he to me off hand like, writer bodies hae the trick o't, 'If ye happen to see Mossgiel, tell him to gie me a look in anytime durin' business hours,' he said 'business hours' very pertickler. Can ye pick any meanin' oot o' that d'ye think?"

"Maybe," replied Burns. "But, Benny—"

"Yer, 'but's' aye a bad dog to hunt wi'," interrupted Benny. "You pretendin' to be dull in the uptake. Na, na, it wina dae. Forby there's this business o' Jean bein' hame

frae Paisley," he went on, piling fuel on a blazing fire. "It seems she's had great times trapeezin' wi' Rabbie Wilson, the Mauchline weaver lad that's gone oot west, ye ken. Dancin' and coortin' to the nines. A winsome enough lass, Jean, though it's a peety she's pockmarked. Noo that she's back, she's greetin' her e'en oot, I hear. Maybe that has something to do wi' things."

Burns's pulses were drumming furiously; and for one instant the air about him was a mass of flying sparks. But with a fierce effort he crushed down his emotion.

"I'm glad she enjoyed herself," he responded, with well feigned indifference. "Paisley seems to be a sociable sort of place."

"Like maist other places where lads and lasses meet," observed Benny sapiently. "Human nature, Mossgiel, human nature. Ah! thae lasses, thae lasses," he broke off. "It was a lassie made me what—I am. She was good and she was bonnie, but she was na for me. It wisna her faut, and it wisna mine. Siller was at the back o't. It broke her heart and put the devil in mine. It's a lang, lang while ago. The snaws o' near fifty years hae come and gane since I lookit on her last; but she's aye young to me."

"And fair," breathed Burns.

"And fair," agreed Benny. "Ay and she grows fairer and fairer wi' every day that passes. And she was true, true as ever God made heart o' woman. Ance a year I tramp to Liddesdale to see her grave and put a handfu' o' daisies on it. It's in a wee Kirkyard among the hills and naebody sees auld Benny as he drops till his knees owre the green sod thinkin' o' her he canna forget."

Burns was silent, not daring to trust himself to speak.

"When I lost her," pursued Benny, "I went clean daft. The deil got haud o' me. I just didna care what I did or what became o' me. I drank, I focht, I gaed gyte wi' the lasses. I got jyled. Time came when there was nothing for it but the road. An Elliott of Liddesdale beggin' his bread

frae door to door, wha's forebears rode and feasted wi' kings, an Elliott scrapin' an auld black bitch o' a fiddle for a handfu' o' meal in his poke; och! man whiles I just want to take it owre my knee and smash it to smithereens. Then I say to mysel', 'It's the only friend ye hae left.' And anyway, Wanderin Willie's wanderin' will soon be owre. Ane o' thae days he'll lie doon for a lang, lang rest, wi' never a thocht o' crazed banes or a cauld bed. But what am I tellin' ye a' this for?" he cried, suddenly pulling himself up. "You that hae sae much o' yer ain to think o'?"

For answer a hand went out in the dark, found his, and pressed it; the grip of a brother. Burns's heart was in his throat. That girl lying in a Liddesdale kirkyard for well nigh half a century; yet still remembered, still worshipped by her poor, discarded wandering lover. What a mystery was the human heart, how wild and untractable, how true and noble! Benny's unexpected confidence left him dumb. For, God help him, was he, too, not supping on gall, treading the flinty, mazy way in utter darkness towards a goal which the shuddering imagination pictured black as Acheron?

CHAPTER 8

SLEEP "which knits the ravelled sleeve of care" forsook Burns that night. But he did not lie awake in fear of James Armour or the parish constable. Far other thoughts than persecution or prison bars beat in his fevered mind. Jean; Mary; Mary; Jean. Throughout the long night, they stood before him, vivid as fire and with fire's power to sear and scathe. Jean was close by down there in the Cowgate, and he forbidden to look near her. She had forsaken him, cast him off as if fervent vows and passionate embraces were trifles light as air, signifying nothing. He was not yet aware how she was coerced or what the act of rejection cost her. He only knew that he was no longer her lover, that there would be no more clandestine meetings in the gloaming, no more love-signals from the small upper window as he went in and out of the Whitefoord Arms. Dismissed in disgrace! He, Robert Burns, the proudest man alive, ignominiously rejected, thrown as it were, in disdain on the scrap heap. There was a dose to stomach. Curse them all, curse the whole tribe of them, root and branch.

In such crises and convulsions of feeling there is a violent throwback to the primal, the elemental. Heredity, atavism, ape and tiger red in tooth and claw; call it what you will—the thing lurks in the secret recesses of human nature ever on the watch to break through the thin veneer of civilization, of convention. Burns, the tenderest of poets, the most humane of men, the big hearted brother who took all humanity to his breast, was back at a bound to the savagery of the cave-man robbed of his woman.

In a fierce revulsion of pride and rage, he turned to Mary. At first she would not listen. He was Jean's, and she would not be guilty of the meanness of taking what

belonged to another. But the truth, backed by such pleas as he alone could make, made her bosom swell with pity. From pity to love is but a step; and Mary's pure maiden-love was his, without stint or question. Well he knew its purity, its generosity, its saving grace. In the blackness of night he rehearsed the last, never-to-be-forgotten, scene. And then, that dim, dear image fading into the night! His eyes grew moist; his whole being melted in an agony of love, longing and adoration.

Why then did he vex himself with thoughts of the unfaithful Jean, why not pluck out the poisoned barb and fling it away? Incensed pride, fuming egotism, the raging chagrin of the scorned amorist, you may say. True in part, but far, far short of the whole truth. He had loved Jean with a love that verged on craziness. Was that love dead? Were all those hours of sweet, secret bliss to count for nothing, or was the memory of them to be ruthlessly rooted out, cast away and forgotten? Possible to some natures; impossible to Robert Burns. Her once "dear idea" still entwined his heart, if not tenderly yet with all the gripping force of inveterate passion.

His every thought, he told himself, was loyalty to Mary; yet between him and her stood the fateful figure of Jean like a menace of disaster. What in Heaven's name was to be the issue?

With the first glimmer of dawn he was up, dressed quickly, and quietly, and stole out without disturbing his brother who slept by his side. He went to the stable and the horses whinnied a welcome. To each he spoke by name, stroking and clapping them fondly. One, his own particular pet, nozzled in his coat pocket for an accustomed bon-bon of oat-cake. The pocket was empty, but as a special mark of affection, all got a surreptitious treat of corn. They were so glad to see him, these speechless comrades of toil.

Next he went to the byre sniffing the warm, odorous

breath of kine. The cows lay in a double row, placidly chewing the cud against milking time. He looked at them in a surge of tragic emotion. How blest compared with him! Care did not furrow their brows; they did not fret and fever themselves over love affairs or the problem of living. Would that he could say as much for himself.

Turning hastily away, he strode off into the fields, the dew-wet grass laving his feet, the cool morning air like a benediction on his brow. As he went, day came up, a shimmering pearly grey which was soon a rosy flood. Thrilled and fascinated, he halted to survey the glistening bejewelled landscape. Ah! if man could only renew his strength and Beauty like that. But man was what? What but a shadow pursuing shadows. How insignificant, futile and tragic in presence of the ever renewed, everlasting power of nature.

He wandered on. At his approach rabbits went scurrying to their holes, a sad commentary on man's dominion, he reflected; a munching, startled hare sat up on its haunches, watching him in readiness to bolt; and he turned aside in shame. In a copse hard by a mavis all at once broke out in joyous welcome to the sun. He stopped, holding his breath. Then suddenly, as in a spasm of unbearable pain, he called out "Stop, oh! stop, sweet birdie, or you'll break my heart."

Rebuking himself sharply for an emotional, sentimental fool, he turned abruptly back. He might suffer; but the sun would shine and the birds sing and nature adorn herself with no thought of him. Sages, optimists, poets, his own unfortunate clan, might say or sing what they liked about the glory of man and the joy of living; but the eternal truth was that man was made to mourn. His dower of folly, of licentious passion, ensured that. What then? After all might it not be that the man who never thought or who drowned his woes in liquor or forgot

them in riotous living, was the true sage? Alas and alas! he had tried that philosophy and it, too, had failed.

His mother was waiting for him. He brightened at sight of her; but, as they met he saw with a pang that her face was wan and her eyes troubled.

"Whit makes ye so early afit, Robin?" she asked, though feeling that the question was superfluous. "Danderin' a' yer lane when ye ocht to be in bed."

"Oh!" he answered with affected lightness. "When one has been away a while, one likes to see how things are."

"Ye look kind o' white-faced, dearie," she said, disregarding his airiness. "And tired aboot the een. Hae ye no' sleepit weel?"

He smiled wistfully. The eyes of affection were not to be deceived.

"A touch of Hamlet's complaint, mother—too much thinking."

She knew nothing of Hamlet, but too well she knew the cruelty of thought.

"Ay," she said simply, "thinkin' gars ye lose sleep whiles. But ye should be in yer bed."

"And you?" he returned. "Let's cap the double folly with a proverb. Twa fools in ae hoose bring doon the riggin'. Be wiser in future, I'm angry with you."

She saw that he was in no mood to be questioned, though a hundred troubled questions beat in her mind. This big, gifted son of hers perplexed her sorely. She had the sensation of one into whose hands is committed an engine of unknown construction and power, which may work wonders or go off in a ruinous crash. Might God in his mercy avert disaster.

As they advanced slowly, Benny appeared at the barn door, doffing his ragged hat like a cavalier.

"Morn' gude wife," he called gallantly. "Morn' Moss-giel. I hope I see ye baith weel this braw mornin'."

"The same to you, Benny," returned Burns cordially. "I hope you slept well."

"No' that bad," said Benny, who, like a true Scot, would never admit that anything was ever quite perfect. "Some kittlin' dreams, that's a'. They come when they're no' wanted," he added, glancing significantly at Burns.

"As for that, Benny," was the response, "a very wise man has said, 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on.' Who knows? Maybe life is just a great illusion."

"Some folk hae a fine taste in jokes," commented Benny, contemptuously. "The man who said that never buckled his belt in place o' eatin' his dinner; no, and never lay doon in a limekiln at e'en, like a drookit hen, wonderin' what to do wi' sair banes and soakin' duds. A bit o' that would put dreamin' nonsense oot o' his head."

Burns laughed. "Well! to prove we're not dreaming, I'm for breakfast. Come and share, Benny. It's hard to say when we'll all meet again."

"Ay," said Benny with unction; for he knew the position almost as well as Burns himself. "Braid seas are like to roar atween us or we hae another crack."

After breakfast, which he ate mostly in silence, he held out his hand.

"Gude by, Mossgiel," he said, not too steadily. "And Gude be wi' ye. Ye deserve it. Climb the big ladder. Oot there folk dee or mak' a fortune. You mak' the fortune and let the deein' abe."

"They dee even if they mak' the fortune, Benny," Burns responded. "Life, you know, is not a freehold, not a leasehold even to the rich."

"That's whiles a consolation to puir folk," said Benny, with a touch of grimness. "Still and all you go on and go up, Mossgiel. When ye come back a big man, wi' a fou purse and a wheen black servants, they'll be crookin' the knee and coortin' ye. And be quick that Benny may

be here to see it, and throw his auld hat in the air. And dinna be forgettin' Gavin Hamilton," he added confidentially. "And noo that a's said that can be said, the blessin' o' Heaven go wi' ye."

And shouldering his poke, he strode off, as though to hide his twitching face.

"A gude prayer, dearie," said Mrs. Burness, a quaver in her voice. "A gude, gude prayer. May it be answered and come true, my dear."

CHAPTER 9

BY TEN o'clock Burns was seated in Gavin Hamilton's office in Mauchline, blithely passing the news. The man of law was infectiously merry and provokingly mysterious.

"Yes," he said, in reference to his invitation to call, "I gave Benny Elliott the word, knowing he'd succeed where certain others have failed." He grinned knowingly. "And how's the holiday going? Some folk have all the luck in this mixty-maxty world, leisure to visit friends and dote on scenery, while here am I over the eyes in the sins and troubles of other people."

Burns grinned in turn. "What would become of lawyers, Gavin, if the world suddenly took it into its head to be good and wise and cease quarrelling?"

"Heaven only knows," answered Gavin cheerfully. "A charge on the parish, I suppose. But the good Lord who disposeth all things wisely, has ordained that human bodies are sic fools for a' their colleges and schools. You'll recognize the sentiment and forgive the plagiarism—ay, and their kirks to the bargain, ever to abandon the time-honoured habit of going to law over their grievances, real or imaginary. No, I lose no sleep over any fear that the millennium is upon us." And then, with a quizzing look which Burns did not in the least misunderstand, "You didn't happen to fall in with the parish constable on your way down?"

"Neither horn nor hoof," was the answer. "Queer, but we've been missing each other like debtor and creditor at a fair. What has that excellent man been doing with himself?"

"Scouring the country till his poor feet are a mass of

blisters," replied Gavin, with mock gravity. "Now, I hear he's nursing them back to health and usefulness."

He paused, looking at his friend curiously. "Has no little bird been whispering things in your ear?" he enquired.

"A hint, a bare hint," answered Burns, his pulses going faster and faster.

"Ah! well!" said Gavin with a judicial air. "There's been a trial, not of the ordinary kind by judge and jury, but by public opinion, a wonderfully effective tribunal at times."

"Yes," said Burns, his pulses going still faster.

"The verdict," continued Gavin with the same deliberate, judicial air, "brought some people saner, if not humaner, thoughts. As our beautiful Scotch paraphrase has it, 'Behold how good a thing it is and how becoming well, for enemies to relent when they're shamed into it.' That's Christian. Wherefore a certain case is adjourned *sine die*. It's expected to come up again about the time of the Greek Calends, so that'll give us all a breathing space." He chuckled maliciously.

"Gavin," cried Burns, on a sudden flash of light. "It's your doing; yours to a certainty. Don't deny it. I—"

"If I thought you came to protest and cavil and find fault," interrupted Gavin genially, "I'd show you the door. Is it too early in the day for a dram? Johnny Doo has just got some rare stuff in, I hear."

It was not too early. Turning into the Cowgate on their way to the Whitefoord Arms, they came face to face with the Rev. Mr. Auld. He glowered at them, black as thunder, and passed on without greeting.

"How it comes let doctors tell," observed Gavin dolefully, "but for some reason or other, Daddy Auld does not seem to love us, Mossgiel."

Burns laughed derisively. "Will no one rid me of this

pestilent priest? Meantime pray the Lord he may keep his love. I have no taste for a mixture of vinegar and aloes."

"Make your mind easy," responded Gavin soothingly. "No need for the Lord to interfere. Mr. Auld will waste no affection on lost sheep like us."

The Whitefoord Arms, or Johnny Doo's, as it was familiarly known, stood almost directly opposite the house of James Armour. Mrs. Armour, chancing to look from a front window, a favourite pastime with her, saw the two men approach and enter the inn. Instantly all the fires of hatred blazed up in her.

"There they go," she told herself in boiling venom. "There they go. A bonnie pair; a credit to their Maker. I could scart their e'en oot. Mossgiel wi' his head as high as My Lord. Off to the drinkin' the minute he's free to show his face. That's him, that's him a' owre. If I had my way it's coolin' yer wickedness in another place, ye'd be," she ended, shaking an impotent fist.

She had virulently opposed all notion of leniency or relenting. Mercy indeed! Moses had said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; and Moses was a good and just lawgiver. Let the blackguard drink of the brew he had brewed. But for the awkward fact that she was a devout pillar of the church, she could wish him then and there hurled into perdition. In the circumstances, it was a consoling thought that he was fast working out his own damnation.

All at once she thought of Jean. Next minute she was in the passage, shouting, "Jean, Jean, come here quick. There's something I want you to do."

But the call came too late. Looking forth from the upper window from which she had so often sent tender signals, Jean saw her whilom lover turn into the inn—without so much as a glance in her direction. For one terrible moment her breathing ceased. Robin passing in studied disdain. How could he, how could he after all

that had come and gone? Of course, he had been told lies, treated shamefully. Oh! that he would come just to hear the truth from her own lips. Was—was that to be forever impossible?

Again there came the urgent call from below. "Jean, Jean, d'ye no' hear me?" She descended, trembling as one in a panic. At the first glimpse of her face, her mother almost blurted out, "So ye've seen him, the scoondrel." But luckily she was able to thrust the words back, and with some show of composure instruct Jean to do some menial household work where she could not see the Whitefoord Arms.

Meanwhile, that haunt of sociability resounded with the joyous greetings of cronies assembled for their morning dram, or in the vernacular their "eleven o'clock." For that delectable celebration, Johnny Doo's was the fashionable resort, and that morning the rousing welcome to Burns made the scene riotously gay and festive. It was "Gie it a name, Mossiel"; or "Whiskey and freedom gang thegither, tak' aff yer dram"; or, with roars of laughter over the neatness of the quotation, "Surely you'll be your pint stoup and surely I'll be mine."

When healths had gone round and all were properly primed with liquor and good will, Gavin Hamilton produced a document which he unfolded with a look of invitation round the company.

"What's the paper, Maister Hamilton?" one enquired, stirred to curiosity by Gavin's air of importance.

"Our sole and only chance of fame," was the enigmatic reply.

It was—

Proposals for Publishing by Subscription
Scottish Poems by Robert Burns.

Spreading the sheet on the table, he called for pen and ink.

"Now," he went on briskly, dropping into the familiar

doric, "ilka mither's son o' ye wha loves poetry and values the glory of his country sign here please, stating the number of copies wanted."

He headed the list handsomely himself, and under his stimulating example, plus the spur of rivalry, there was an eager rush to sign.

"There ye are, my rantin' rhyming billie," cried the last on a sough of excitement, throwing down his pen. "God! We'll hae ye famous afore ye ken."

"A day's work to be proud of," observed Gavin refolding and putting the document back into his pocket. "Gentlemen, I have the pleasure to inform you that you have signed for immortality. In days to come they'll say, mentioning us each by name, 'he was in at the beginning of this great fame.' For today, we have begun what centuries of time will not efface. And now a toast. 'Coila's, Scotland's Bard.' " And the rafters rang. Burns, thrilled as he had never been before, made his acknowledgment to a second outburst. As by some magic transformation, the fugitive of yesterday found himself the hero of today. It was hard to feel they were the same person.

Coming forth presently, he cast one swift instinctive glance upward at the window which was once such a magnet. No face smiling unutterable things there now. Fortunately Gavin proved a safety valve for the wild, hot feelings that surged up chokingly.

"Well! that's that," he said. "I want to see the whole edition subscribed for."

Burns broke out in gratitude; but Gavin stopped him.

"My dear Mossgiel, a very eminent philosopher has just discovered that all virtue is founded on selfishness. We are virtuous, not for virtue's sake, but our own. We are good, because it pays, and paying, makes us happy. It is self-gratification every time." Then on a graver note, "Occasionally it happens that in doing good deeds we are honouring ourselves—a further reward. Today that good

fortune has been mine, and I am gratified and proud. So the profit on the transaction is with me after all."

Almost as he spoke a familiar figure appeared in the street ahead, halted, seemed to hesitate; then wheeled and retreated at the double. Gavin cast a quick, meaning look at his companion.

"See yon?" he asked. Burns nodded.

"Exquisite tact. A meeting in public would be embarrassing. In my headlong joy I might forget myself, and embrace him. Think of that exhibition of maudlin affection. It would never do."

"So Mr. Armour saves the situation by skedaddling. Most thoughtful. But I'd give sixpence for his feelings."

"Always a spendthrift," laughed Burns. "No man's feelings are worth sixpence in good hard cash."

"Except, let us say when they're transmuted into song," rejoined Gavin, his eyes twinkling gleefully. "Then it's six times sixpence. Ah! ha, got you there, Mossziel. And let me add cheap at the price." Then looking at his watch, "Jupiter, how the ancient enemy flies. It's dinner time, already. Come: the pleasure of your company for pot luck."

Burns needed no pressing. The Hamilton household was always a haven of delight, though now one unsuspected attraction, was, alas! gone. There the persecutions and dire comminations of Daddy Auld and his clique found no echo. Mrs. Hamilton, clever, gracious, and well bred, shared her husband's admiration for the poet, and almost equally his liking for the man. Idle to pretend that Mossziel was wise as the world counted wisdom, but as Gavin said, and she believed, he was worth whole shiploads of his accusers and persecutors. He was not the less welcome now that the clouds were black about him.

After dinner as the trio chatted, a small piping voice came to the door with the appeal. "P'ease, mama, may I come in?" Instantly Burns sprang to his feet, and opening

the door ceremoniously ushered in Miss Hamilton, aged four. Next minute, without any ado over proprieties, she was perched on his knee, gazing into his eyes as if to read some hidden secret.

"Mina's not very happy just now," observed Mrs. Hamilton. "She doesn't understand why Mary left, and wants her back again."

"'Cause I love her," said Mina promptly. And then, looking Burns squarely in the face, "Do oo?" Fortunately her mother answered for her.

"Of course he does. Everybody loves Mary." She explained that Christina, Mary's successor, was still as it were, on probation, and that the issue was doubtful.

"Maïy told us 'tories," said Mina, as if story-telling were the chief function of a nurse. "Teeny no use. She just 'tolds and 'tolds and says ' 'top that or I'll 'kelp ye.' Maïy never 'tolded us."

"No," said Burns, putting a tight curb on himself. "I am sure Mary never scolded you." He could not imagine the gentle Mary scolding anybody.

"I want her," reiterated Mina, pouting as though tears were not far off. "Tell her to tome back to us, Mama," adding, as a bright inspiration, "Say Mothteel wants her too."

He gazed at the mite on his knee. Ah! Mina, Mina, how came you to say that?

Next minute he set her down, saying he must go. He could not bear to speak of Mary or hear her discussed. Besides there was the danger of betraying secrets which, for the present at least, he was sworn not to divulge to anyone, however intimate, however trusted.

CHAPTER 10

NEXT day a second sensation, scarcely less exhilarating than the first, brought Mauchline gossips hurrying to doors and windows. In stark amazement, they saw Mossgiel driving off openly with Gavin Hamilton, as though prisons and parish constables did not exist. What had happened? Had Jean made it up after all, or was James Armour making a virtue of necessity by compromising on facts which could no longer be hidden? Some of the ladies proposed to solve the mystery by a diplomatic descent on Jean's mother; but on second thoughts the idea was dismissed as dangerous. The lady had spirit and a tongue. Better let her alone. A safer plan would be to waylay Jean herself, and lure her into confidences should she venture to show her face out of doors. The boldest would not dream of tackling James Armour.

It was noted that the two friends went out the Kilmarnock Road in spiffing style behind Gavin's fast trotter, just as the parish constable came dawdling in at the other end of the town, for all the world as if the millennium had dropped from the skies and he suddenly found his occupation gone. It was all very mysterious, very animating; so Mauchline heaved a deep, tingling breath of expectation and awaited developments, piously hoping for the worst.

Inter alia criticism abounded. Thus Tibbie of the lemon-face severely censured the Law for its slackness, its too obvious disposition to wink at gross and flagrant iniquity. If wickedness was to go unpunished, what was to become of decent folk?

"What indeed?" mockingly echoed another, who chanced to be her old tormentor, Nancy. "It's lookin' to oorsels we'll hae to be ane and a'. Rob Mossgiel runnin' wild among the lasses. Gude pity and preserve us, but it's

excitin'. It'll be up and bar the door when he's aboot. It makes a body feel dizzy to think o't."

Burns, who never shrank from the sweet ordeal of publicity, was amused, if not gratified by the public attention. Were he led to execution, a spectacle for the gaping populace, he could scarcely be more of a hero. Thinking similar thoughts, Gavin remarked with a chuckle:

"There'll be busy tongues in Mauchline this night."

"Clapper tongues would deave a miller," Burns laughed derisively. "It's enough to make a body vain being so much in men's mouths."

"And especially women's," added Gavin, with a twinkle. "Well, curb your swelling vanity and say a prayer of gratitude. It's all grist to the poet's mill and first rate for the book. So *sursum corda*, my friend. And the world, too, ought to be grateful, for it is about to receive a great gift. I am neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet; but if any man likes to wager, I'm ready."

Burns said nothing. He too had visions of the future. Often the fond thought that he might one day be mentioned among the great makers of song made him tremble in a kind of fearful ecstasy. But those were private dreams for the rapturous private hour when ambition spread wing and soared gloriously into the empyrean.

"Isn't it bonnie?" Gavin exclaimed presently, looking abroad over the shining dappled fields. "Let no one say that when she smiles Scotland is not charming. What a pity you're leaving her." Burns seemed to start.

"That touches me on the quick. I'm going, but Gavin, I'll tell you a little secret. When I go, I take with me a Scotch thistle, my country's emblem, root and earth to nourish it in foreign soil—just to remind me of the dear loved land that decrees my banishment. She rejects me; but one thing she cannot do, she can never kill my love for her. It is in the bone, in the blood. It is part of me, the

best part. I shall love her in spite of herself, counting her cruelty but blindness."

There was the quiver of tears in his voice, and a thrill of something yet deeper, stronger, in his heart.

"I know," said Gavin, simply. "I know."

For some distance they proceeded in silence; then in turning a bend in the road, they caught sight of a vehicle ahead.

"Oh! ho," cried Gavin, "I think I know that back." And gave the bay a looser rein. Very soon the gig in front was overtaken, and coming alongside, Gavin slackened pace.

"Good afternoon, Sheriff," he called out cordially. "Are you for old Kilmarnock?" The Sheriff turned sharply.

"Oh! how d'ye do, Hamilton, and Mr. Burns," he added quickly, his eyes alight with interest and surprise. Burns raised his broad wide-awake in sweeping salutation, a meaning gleam in his black eyes.

"An unexpected meeting, sir," he said.

"An unexpected pleasure on my part," returned the Sheriff with a polite smile. "It's not every day one has the good fortune to forgather with a poet on the highway. And that reminds me, when is the book to be ready?"

"Pull up a moment and I will show you," Hamilton put in, and both vehicles which were almost wheel to wheel, halted. From his pocket he took the document he had used to such effect in Johnny Doo's.

"Cast your eye over that," he said, handing the sheet across.

"Ah!" said the Sheriff, with unfeigned interest and good will. "A subscription list. Well! let me see. Can you spare me a dozen copies or so? I have friends who like to read but are dead sweir to buy. Some folk are unco close with the bawbees."

"Please sign then," Gavin answered, with a business-like air.

The Sheriff signed in pencil. "There," handing the document back. "An honour cheaply secured; only," he smiled at Burns, "there's some doubt whether a signature in pencil constitutes a legal bond or instrument."

"The word of a gentleman is ever the best bond," responded Burns with a bow. The Sheriff bowed in return.

"Thank you. We shall try to deserve the compliment, and indeed, it will be our own loss if we fail." Then on a different note, "We are all agog; in fact from what I hear, the heather is already pretty well on fire, which I interpret as meaning that the success of the book is assured."

"My friends are very generous," responded Burns, with another bow, which the Sheriff thought worthy of any courtier in Europe. "May your predictions prove true, sir."

Growing impatient the bay was pawing and straining at the reins.

"Eager to be off," remarked the Sheriff. "A bonnie, high-mettled beast, Hamilton. You've always been for fancy horse-flesh as your victories at Mauchline races prove. Well! goodbye, and mind my dozen copies. I'll just be jogging after you."

Burns raised his hat and the bay got its head, soon leaving the sedate, leisurely nag of the law behind.

"Bound for Johnny Wilson's printing office," Gavin called over his shoulder. "Some extras for the book."

The Sheriff, who always drove himself, waved his whip. Then, turning to the man beside him, he said:

"Have a good look, Thomas. In years to come people will be asking what manner of man Robert Burns was, and you'll be proud to tell them from personal knowledge. By the way, I'll sell you a copy of his book, and I'll add a tip. Make it a family heirloom, as I mean to do. For mark me, some day it'll be worth many times its weight in gold."

"I suppose, sir," returned Thomas with a smirk,

"there'll be a whang or two about the lasses. Mossziel could never pass them owre."

"Let that flea stick to the wa', Thomas," was the rejoinder. "Buy the book for its poetry, and you'll have good value, ay, enduring value. For poetry, Thomas, that is true poetry, is one of the very few things in this world that defy time itself."

Not a word about warrants.

Still accompanied by Gavin, Burns handed his printer several additional pieces, and corrected some proofs. Mr. Wilson was delighted; but he was also doubtful and perturbed.

"I'm no' denying, Mossziel," he explained, "that the things are grand, first class. I've slapped my leg till it was sore owre them. But losh! man, it's kind o' fleein' in the face of Providence. Think o' the clatter they'll raise. What'll Daddy Auld and his friends say?"

"That you and I are sons of perdition past praying for," was the blithe answer. "Did you ever hear the story of old Lovat, who lost his head on Tower Hill, London, for the damnable crime of being a patriot?"

"No," replied John. "Never that I mind o'."

"It's one of the tit-bits of history," Burns assured him seriously. "As an execution was a gay event and a crowd of the best people wanted to see it, a grand stand was put up for them. At the last moment when all was ready for the sport, and the criminal was to be led out, like a victim in the bull-ring, down comes the stand with a resounding crash. A good many people were killed and a great many more maimed. Lovat asked what the noise was. A warder told him. 'Ah!' says he, and they lie if there was not glee in his tone. 'Splendid. The more mischief the better sport.' That's an inspiring example. So, my dear John, we'll just cock our bonnets and take the fun as it comes. Every word shall be printed precisely as I wrote it; not a single letter changed; not a syllable omitted.

Mr. Wilson was grieved, but made shift to laugh.

"Ah! weel, ah! weel! what's no' meat for the bairns may be meat for the horse, as the man said when he stole the bag o' corn. We'll just hae to try and thole."

"Let us thole joyously," struck in Gavin. "The Lord loveth a pleasant countenance. And since all goes as gaily as a Hallowe'en party, let us adjourn and drink to a unique event."

In the King's Arms, the swell hostelry of Kilmarnock, the toast was given and honoured hilariously by a gay and enthusiastic company. For Gavin Hamilton, who had an eye beyond frothy sentiment and liquorish jollity, engineered a second business ovation that was even more gloriously successful than the first. The business part ended, he drew Mr. Wilson's attention to the signature in pencil.

"Eh! Gude save us, the Sheriff," was John's amazed exclamation. "That's the physic for them. They'll think twice before sticking their claws in *him*." And, fortified by this unexpected support, he withdrew all objections. "Go ahead, Mossgiel," he said, beaming from ear to ear. "Let naething daunt ye. We're doing grand; we're going grand."

It was said that Burns was never more brilliant, never more fascinating than in that impromptu celebration in the King's Arms. He had the company rocking with laughter.

"What a man!" they cried, wiping their eyes. "There's nae leemit till him." They could listen to him forever, they declared. Some, under the spell of his enchantment, even forgot to drink. But to Gavin alone did he express the feeling at his heart; and he did it not in words, but with a look beyond words and a silent pressure of the hand.

That night, for the first time in many weeks, he slept like the dead. Made a new man physically (what a magic medicine is sleep!) he was up by daybreak next morning, and crept to the tiny attic under the eaves where he had fitted himself a rude desk. There for two absorbed hours,

he wrote at fever heat. Then, breakfast over, he went into the barn where some remnants of last season's oats still remained to be threshed. Gilbert was there ready to begin; but with a "Let me" Robert threw off his coat. In all the countryside there was not his match with the flail, the "thresher's weary flingin'-tree" of his song. This might be his last bout. His last! For one moment he had to turn away to hide his emotion. Then on a fierce resolution that sent his blood racing, he set to work—stroke upon stroke, stroke upon stroke, strong, exact, regular, rhythmic, as if delivered by an automaton with arms of steel. Then the threshing done, the heap of grain and chaff was gathered up and put through the fanners, he "feeding," while Gilbert turned the handle. At last the golden corn lay clean and beautiful on the swept floor.

"Bonnie, isn't it?" Robert remarked lovingly, taking up a handful and letting it sift through his fingers. "Was ever bonnier grown in Egypt? I wonder will there be such corn in the Indies." After a pause he added, "You'll take it to the mill today, Gilbert. I think the meal giral must be running low. We maun eat, brother, if we're to live."

Immediately after the midday dinner of broth and potatoes, he dressed with some care.

"And where are ye for the day, Robin?" asked his mother, who had her own acute anxieties over his comings and goings.

"Mauchline," he answered cheerfully. "And no need to look sad, mother. Today, at any rate, I think it will be pleasant sailing."

He set off at a swinging pace, his heart light, his head high; and an hour later walked in on Gavin.

"A bit rhyme for you," he announced, passing over a double sheet of manuscript.

Gavin began to read, paused on a gasp of astonishment, read again and sprang to his feet.

"Robin," he cried, his eyes shining, his pulses dancing.

"What's this? You make me think I'm dreaming. It—it fairly takes away my breath."

"Then you accept?" Burns was smiling quietly.

"Accept?" was Gavin's ringing response, as he caught Burns's hand like a vice. "Don't be silly, and don't be sarcastic. I haven't words to express my sense of the honour you do me. It is too much."

"Would it were worthier, my dear and generous friend," rejoined Burns in a low, not very steady, voice.

It was the immortal "Dedication to Gavin Hamilton, Esq."

CHAPTER 11

WHILE Burns practised the difficult art of hiding in and around Mauchline, Mary landed at Campbeltown from the tiny coasting brig in which she made the final stage of her journey from the Firth of Clyde. A modern tourist would have found the *Chailin Dhu* an offence to all his elegant tastes. Mary found it all entrancing. By day the sun shone gloriously; by night the sky was luminous with her own bright northern stars. Arran, to which *he* had so often looked across with her, lay like a great tawny gem set in a silver sea. The Cambraes with their clustering, picturesque group of hills, gleamed and shimmered, a feast of iridescence; and peak and glen and loch seemed to welcome her like the faces of old and dear friends. In that enchanted circle, far from the bewilderingments, turmoil and evil speaking of towns, one might dream dreams of perfect bliss; and Mary did much dreaming. Delightful, too, most delightful of all to her Celtic heart, the sailors, hauling shroud and tackle, chanted their chanties in the tongue, every accent of which spoke of home and kindred. She could have wept for joy as she listened.

She stepped ashore, a bundle of beating nerves and drumming arteries. By the primitive wharf, misnamed a pier, several people knew and hailed her; but she scarcely heard their greeting and did not at all notice their looks of surprise at seeing her. She had some distance to go through pitted, rutted, miry ways, skirting impromptu cesspools among a huddle of turf-built huts, their roofs, in many instances, sprouting green with the new season's grass. On several, goats cropped; and once she started at the vicious click of horns. Then with a smile, she remembered how Campbeltown goats fought out their differences on

roofs—a home-like reminder of Highland pugnacity. She caught her bundle, her sole baggage, the more tightly, and hurried on.

The house of her father, Archibald Campbell, a sailor turned petty farmer, stood in a dingle of the hills invisible from the clustered houses on the beach below, beside a purling burn. At sight of it, she halted an instant, holding her breath; then ran trembling with excitement. The door stood open. In the smoke dimmed interior, a woman was bent over a pot slung by a chain from a cross-bar above a peat fire. With a cry of "Mother!" Mary was upon her. She turned quickly, pot-stick in hand, her eyes almost leaping from their sockets.

"Morag, Morag!" And the two, pot-stick and bundle flung aside, were in each other's arms.

"My lamb! how you made my heart jump," her mother panted, at last finding tongue for coherent speech. "What brings you, mo vrone?" Then quickly, as Mary wiped glistening eyes, "Ah! you are smiling. You bring good news."

"I am going to be married, mother." For one tense moment her mother stood breathless.

"Married," she cried, then, "Married! Oh, ho! married. Tell me."

But before Mary could tell, her father entered, curious and a little agitated. Some obliging gossip told him of her arrival, and he hastened home, fearful lest bad news awaited him. He was a shy, reserved man, meagre of speech, and of person, a contrast (much remarked) to his wife, who was buxom and voluble. Mary sprang to embrace him, his wife in the same moment crying out excitedly: "Home to be married, home to be married! What do you think of that?"

He looked fondly at his daughter. "Do you tell me? That's news, my Morag. What—what is the man?"

A farmer, he was told. Ah! a farmer, with valuable

stock likely, large fertile fields, and a cosy home for his bride. A trifle haltingly Mary answered:

"Yes," adding after a pause, "but he's giving over the farm to his brother and going abroad."

"Abroad?" echoed her father. "What's he doing that for, Morag? Where is he going?"

There was surprise and even a suggestion of alarm in his tone.

In some confusion Mary did her best to explain. Robin was very, very clever, and very ambitious. As there was more scope for ability abroad, he had decided to accept the post of overseer on a plantation in Jamaica. There, with so many opportunities of advancement, he was sure to rise quickly to wealth and importance. Her father listened, with a grave face.

"It's a long, long way to go for a living, Morag," he said. "And he'd be among the wild black folk. If he's got the gifts, what ails him at Scotland?"

That was a question Mary durst not answer. Concerning certain momentous things her lips were sealed; but how make her tale convincing without betraying secrets? Luckily her mother, bubbling over with eagerness, struck in:

"And is he to come back for you?"

Yes, he was to come back for her soon, or if circumstances prevented him, he would send her passage money and they would be married in Jamaica.

"And you love him well enough for that, mo vrone?"

For answer it occurred to Mary to unpack the Bible and display the inscription; but she remembered her lover's injunction; besides neither her father nor mother could read English though in talk they were bi-lingual.

"Yes, mother," she answered, flushing crimson. "And—and I forgot to tell you he is a poet and writes poetry that everybody says is beautiful."

"Oh! a bard!" exclaimed her father. Agriculture and

poetry. He had never known them go together; and in fact knew nothing of bards, except as apanages of the great—housed, fed and clothed for writing songs in praise of their warrior lords. Not one of them, if tradition could be trusted, was ever rich. Some of them were not even respectable. Perhaps Morag's man was different. But, were it the will of Providence, a farmer of solid substance, minus any mixture of poesy, would be preferable as a son-in-law.

Incidentally he enquired if her Robin were attached to any great lord as a hireling laureate meant to celebrate his master's deeds of valour and fame? Mary answered with spirit, No, Robin was not attached to any lord. He stood on his own merit as a man, and would not be bribed into servile flattery by all the lords in Scotland. He preferred independence.

"And it's for that he's going abroad," said her father, to whom Jamaica was a black chill shadow on the brightness. But her mother, with a woman's provident eye to the great objective, smilingly remarked:

"Well, well! Lord or no lord, it'll be a wedding anyway. And that," she added blithely, "is what keeps the world going." In the next breath she was calling out—"Mercy on us! there's the pot boiling over. The greasach drowned and the place thick with ashes. Ochone, ochone. Phew!" She turned in mock rebuke to Mary. "There, that's what comes of you and your Robin. There'll be no dinner this day. There's for you, my lass."

And Mary smiled as she brushed the cloud of grey peat-ash off her mother's clothes. But her father went out pondering.

CHAPTER 12

IF SELF the wavering balance shake." Burns gloomily pondered his own warning. Oh! yes, for others he could pour out the pure ore of wisdom; had he none for himself, or must it for ever be the old cutting jibe, Physician heal thyself? He looked back and was full of remorse; he looked forward and was afraid. Outsiders might think or say this and that; he knew the bitter truth. To himself, and he was ever his own clear-eyed critic and honest judge, he was a derelict ship adrift in a black sea and a driving tempest, without rudder or compass. Life was no longer an ordered progress towards a shining goal; it was a chaos of folly and calamity, a succession of fiery impulses and fierce reactions that tore and rent as if he were the sport of implacable furies.

One resource, one divine, uplifting solace was still left to him—a gift of song that was to irradiate the darkness, shed a magic on Mossiel which was to amaze and enchant the ages. Often he would steal away abruptly to his coop of an attic, and there, at his rough deal desk under the tiny, single-paned window, write with headlong speed, a mere amanuensis of the Muse, it might seem, scarcely able to keep pace with the rushing surge of thought and feeling. In that unlikely place, in face of hostile omens, the pure gold of poetry gushed, like water from the smitten rock, as though glowing, vibrating masterpieces were effortless creations, things of glittering gossamer thrown off lightly as passing whims and fancies.

But for every triumph of the poet, the man paid with his heart's blood. He alone knew that the material in the crucible of the one was the cankerous thoughts and poisoned passions of the other. Would to God he could be like the cheerful, complacent, commonplace, prudent, plodding

people about him; even while he satirized he envied them. With smaller gifts and cooler blood, he, too, might be a reputable, mediocre citizen, prayerfully devout, soberly devoted to respectability, and the gathering of gear. But, as Gavin Hamilton once remarked, he was nursed to other ends. "Out of thine own stricken heart shalt thou speak," was the fiat. And according to the fiat, is the speech. It is heart speaking to heart.

One observer, and one only, saw, understood, and feared. His mother watched him with an aching anxiety. Of Robin's poetry her knowledge was wholly by hearsay; she could not even read it. But Robin's welfare, temporal and eternal, was her constant, often tearful concern. And too easily the eyes of love discerned he was unhappy from several causes.

One proof she had that made her heart stop. Hearing a voice from his cock-loft of a writing room one night, she halted to listen. Was Robin declaiming to himself some new piece he had written, or was some one with him? Her breath was stayed in her breast. Robin was not reciting or talking to a visitor; he was praying in an agony of remorse, pleading for grace, for strength, for that last resource of the wretched—courage to face whatever might be. Then all at once the voice faltered, broke and died into silence; and she knew that Robin wept. She fled, weeping herself. Her true-hearted, noble, erring Robin! God grant his anguished prayer. He was leaving her. What was to be his fate? How would he fare among snares and pitfalls when she could no longer be by to comfort and succour? Oh! that Divine wisdom might guide, and Divine power protect her beloved.

One thing, in the secrecy of her heart, grieved and hurt her beyond all others—that of late he had withheld his confidences. His reticence pained her. It pained her yet more to mark how he brooded. The look of black dejection when he thought no one was watching, the deep, heavy,

unconscious sigh, the restlessness as of one in a mental ferment—all these told their tale too plainly. Again and again she was on the point of crying out, "Oh! Robin, oh! my dear, won't you tell me?" But as that would only hurt, she held her peace.

Many a time she watched him steal away in the late gloaming or the dusk of daybreak to wander alone and unseen. To be sure it was an old habit of his to take such lonely walks. Once when she gently chided him, he answered with a laugh, "The Muse, nae poet ever fand her till by himsel' he learned to wander." That, of course, was his daffin', his incurable love of jesting. Now alas! he had other reasons for going off alone. She had never heard of Macbeth. Yet Macbeth's thought was hers. Robin was trying to minister to a mind diseased. God help him!

Meantime his bearing in public seemed a flat denial of all her fears and anxieties. Whatever might gnaw at his heart, his head was high and his tongue dangerously incisive. And he had need of a brave spirit; for if friends were ardent, foes were blatant and busy.

"Hee, hee," cried one, who had suffered under the lash of his satire, as he was passing the door of a Mauchline shebeen. "There he goes! For the Lord's sake look to yer wives and dochters." Burns turned, with a flash of his black eyes. "I seem to know that mellifluous bray. Oh! the Cuddy of Ochiltree; no faith, the mule, the hybrid progeny of a poaching jackass."

"There's for ye," came in a chorus of laughter, as Burns strode on. "Ye may girn but daurna bite wi' him. He's the boy."

A little later another, who himself had aspirations as a buck and a satirist, hailed him with the greeting—

"And how goes the Court of Equity, Mossgiel?"

"Ready, aye ready," was the bland and instant answer. "Has your deception induced lovely woman to stoop to folly? Come along, and we'll deal with you."

The reference was to the ungodly club founded and directed by Burns for the express purpose (so it was held) of outraging and scandalizing public and private decency. Now that its president and laureate made such a stir, some blithe lads went about with ribald airs chanting snatches of a poem circulated in manuscript, setting forth its aims with more daring than delicacy. *Pro bono amor* was its motto; its avowed purpose "to take beneath our strict protection" any "quondam" maiden with a grievance, and brand the false lover as a traitor in gallantry. Its proceedings, reported darkly with gorgeous embroiderings, gave the enemies of its founder a chance not to be missed. Counting themselves chosen to do the Lord's work, they marked and tabulated his sins one by one, entering them up against him, like debts in a ledger.

In that band of moral accountants the most vigilant by far were the Rev. William Auld and his trusty lieutenant, Elder Fisher, known to lovers of satire as the hero (anointed and consecrated for sacrifice) of "Holy Willie's Prayer." With lynx-eyed watchfulness they noted how their prospective victim piled sin upon sin against the day of reckoning, which they swore should be a day of wrath.

"We maun hook him quick or he'll gie us the slip," Mr. Fisher urged. "Ance he's off and owre the sea, it'll be a finger at his nose, and catch me wha can. I'm fair scunnered wi' James Armour," William added in pious disgust. "Just throwin' awa his oppertuneety. I'd hae clappit the man in jyle and keepit him there till the Session was ready for him."

"He's not gone yet," said Mr. Auld grimly. "And anyway we have Jean."

"That's aye something," observed William, prepared to be thankful for small mercies. "But we should make sure o' him. What I canna stomach, Mr. Auld, is his brazen, upsettin' pride. Ye'd think he owned the earth, and him—what we ken."

Mr. Auld grunted complete agreement.

"Mair nor that," continued William, "ye'd think he was up to his deevilish ploys just to spite us. And think hoo thick he is wi' that drinkin', swearin', sabbath-breakin' atheist, Gavin Hamilton."

"A spawn of Satan," snapped Mr. Auld.

"And bearin' the marks on his forehead, like the wild beast o' Scriptir," supplemented Mr. Fisher. "Sic a brailzie as he kickit up that time afore the Presbytery. The conceit and impidence o' him. As gude as ca'ed ye a leer to yer face, Mr. Auld. He might hae keepit *that* till himsel'. I could hae grat wi' spite. And the sneerin', sniffin', insultin' way he said that heresy was anything you didna happen to like, and truth just what suited ye, as if you didna ken what folk should believe and do, and what they shouldna."

"A rank episcopalian like his father before him," growled Mr. Auld, his face suddenly black at the memory of old feuds. "If I had my way, Mauchline would soon be rid of him."

"The deil was never mair welcome to go," said Mr. Fisher, with all the unction of holy hate. "It's another Samuel he needs, to hew him into collops like Agag. It's very mortifyin', Mr. Auld, very mortifyin'. But keep at him, keep at him. Ye'll hae him yet. As for Mossgiel, may the Lord put a hook in his nose and a tether on his feet. You just stick in, Mr. Auld. He lauchs at us. Weel, gie him a taste o' his ain sweet medicine."

In fact, in his own apt words, it was to be—

Shake him owre the mouth o' hell,
There let him hing, and roar, and yell.
And if he offers to rebel
Just heave him in.

That would teach him.

They were in Mr. Auld's own room in Mauchline Manse. A capacious punch-bowl steamed pleasantly on a

table between them, and under its benign influence they decided *nem. con.* that Mossgiel was the particular kind of sinner to whom no mercy should be shown.

While they were hot on the chase, it happened that St. James's Masonic Lodge organized a vainglorious celebration and procession; and, of course, Mossgiel must needs parade himself in the forefront, as Deputy Master, no less. Elder Fisher, briefed to watch for Minister and Kirk Session, reported how he strutted in full regalia (he had always cash enough for vanity), cheek by jowl with a Worshipful Master, who was no other than Sheriff Wallace. More than that, the Sheriff, making a pretence of feebleness, actually leaned on the fellow's arm, as though honouring him with the countenance of the Law. Heh! a fine state of affairs. Mr. Auld shut his mouth hard. The Sheriff had better beware. Even he might have cause to rue if the batteries of the Kirk were turned on him.

And indeed, he ought to have remembered that to self-constituted despotism there is no more damnable crime than independence. The Sheriff's unseemly behaviour prompted the pertinent question—How came it that the warrant was withdrawn which should have laid Mossgiel by the heels, *pendente lite*? Ah! if only corruption and malpractice could be proved. What a chance, what a triumph to gloat over! The hunters could only pray and persevere.

Happily Jean was in safe-keeping. Once in the course of his duty as detective, Mr. Fisher called on her with a series of questions nicely calculated to entangle. To his disgust she refused to see him.

"Ah! weel, ah! weel," he sighed compassionately to her mother. "Nae doot she kens her ain sins best, puir lass. Gude day, Mistress Armour, and thenkee."

Outside he cast a scowling glance at upper windows.

"Ay," he muttered, "ye may hide the day; but oor time's comin', my lass. Ye've made sure o' that yersel'."

Sulk or fume as she might, she could neither escape

herself nor save her partner in guilt. She was as good as caught; and they had their eye on him. He strutted in public; but secretly and feloniously he was getting ready to leave the country—"absconding" was Mr. Auld's charitable word. Already his beggarly interest in Mossiel farm was transferred to Gilbert on behalf of his misbegotten brat by the servant maid, Lizzie Paton. One thing only detained him—to foist his vile, blasphemous rhymes on a duped and innocent public. But they were up to his tricks. And of one thing they were certain, that if they could not make him humble and docile, they could at least make him miserable. That in itself was no mean gratification.

CHAPTER 13

MEANWHILE, among the quiet hills and by the sounding seas of Argyle, Mary lived in a world of enchanted dreams. And in all her dreams Robin was the central, shining figure. Nor did Robin forget her. He wrote her long letters, letters so ardent, so glowing, so full of what her heart craved that they were almost as good as being with him, she told herself. Unreservedly frank, as was his habit, he described exactly how he fared and felt in "our unco guid little inferno" as he called it, now in a vein of rollicking fun, now with barbed sarcasms, but mostly with a passionate tenderness that made her quiver with joy.

Usually his letters contained passionate little love-lyrics, gems of song meant for her alone. How prodigal he was with his gifts, and what gifts they were. She kept his letters next her heart, and as often as she was alone, she would take them out and pore over them with ten times the ardour of the miser gloating over his treasures. In spite of everything, she was exquisitely happy, happy and proud. The most marvellous man alive, as she had so often heard him described, by her old master, Mr. Hamilton. And she was his chosen confidante; his love was hers. Often she had to wipe her eyes over the wonderful thought.

Sometimes she spoke of him shyly to her mother, who had a world of searching questions to ask; but more frequently, and much more freely to her younger sister, Annie, though Annie was but fourteen. One sweet secret, however, she kept to herself.

"I am counting the days, my love," Robin wrote, "till you are in my arms again. Days! I mean hours; no, I mean minutes. For it is God's truth, my dearie, you are so much

to me, I would, if I could, annihilate time and space and fly to you. My arms ache and my heart leaps with longing."

To onlookers, it might appear Mary had scant leisure to waste on dreams or idle cogitations. She found much to do in the little household, and busied herself as though idleness were an indictable offence. Fresh rushes had to be cut daily and strewn on the earthen floor of the cottage; blankets washed and tramped with bare feet by the burn-side; tarry, sticky wool to be cleaned and carded for spinning and weaving into homemade garments. Only the gentry, and the best even of them, could afford fine cloth from the looms of Glasgow and Paisley, or silks from far off London, to say nothing of fashionable make-up. Common folk had to be their own manufacturers, tailors, dress-makers, milliners and general outfitters. Noting her extreme activity, her passion for cleanliness, neighbours remarked that surely Archy Campbell's Morag must be "a bit cracked," or was she putting on airs by trying to introduce the modishness of the South? Some who had travelled into the Lowlands, quoted with unction the sound Scots proverb, "the clartier, the cosier."

Further afield peats had to be "cast" and dried, for the blazing winter fire and the jolly company that would gather about it—the women with their spinning-wheels and bone knitting needles, as large as arrows; the men, who were ever idlers, to pass the time with song and story of the brave days of old when Ossian's heroes, or their descendants, trod the heath, making swords clash and run red. Ah! those were the times and the men. As Mary wheeled her barrow to the "spreading ground" on the sunny hillside, she thought how Robin would thrill and quicken over tales of valour that made Hector and Achilles laggards and bunglers in war, and what Homeric use he would make of them. True, she had never heard of Troy and its heroes, nor of the poet who makes their fame live

for ever. She only knew in her fond heart that there never was, or could be again, such a poet as Robin.

More heartsome and more picturesque was the idyllic romance of long, long summer days and witching northern nights in the sheilings among the hills. That was a three months' joyous outing for able-bodied maidens who could herd cattle and make butter and cheese in an Eden free from men. To be sure the annual adventure had lost something of its ancient savour. Hungry and vengeful clans no longer descended in creachs, which is to say, fierce forays, to carry off cattle and maidens alike, should the latter happen to be pretty and winsome. Some regretted the passing of old romantic customs. The foray was a convenient method of augmenting stocks, and with luck securing handsome wives and not undesirable husbands. Still there were compensations. For sure, as evening fell, up came the lads from farms and cot-houses below. Then gleeful, light-footed dancers took the green to the rousing music of the pipes.

Not all, however, danced. Some preferred to wander off, lad and lass together, in the long soft gloaming; so that it was said that of all places for bringing my Lord Cupid's dear devices to a head, beyond comparison the best were the lonely sheilings in the green solitudes among the hills.

One in particular loved to wander thus with Mary. He was Callum Og, Callum the younger, the only son of a well-to-do tacksman, a youthful giant with a shy manner, a slow tongue, and a handsome, honest, open face. She treated him with the easy freedom, the confidence of an old playmate. Long before, with all the decision of six and a half, he had said, "Morag, when I'm a big man, I'm going to marry you. Now mind."

And Morag had answered without blush or hesitation, "Yes, of course, Callum." Now a grown man and ready to carry out his resolution, he reminded her, though in faltering words, of that early promise. But Mary was no longer the bare-footed little girl in pinafore.

"Callum," she answered, in an agitation which threatened to choke her, "I like you dearly. I always did. You know that. Haven't we played together, and do you think I could forget? But—but, Callum, dear—"

A look of blank dismay came into Callum's boyish face.

"What is it, Morag?" he asked. "It's not going to tell me you have changed, you are?" Then as the fatal truth dawned on him. "Is—is there somebody away in the South?"

And Mary, who never knew how to equivocate, or be insincere, answered simply, "Yes, Callum."

They sat on a sun-warmed, mossy rock. Below the dancers wheeled and set and hooched till the rocks rang; but Callum neither heard nor saw. A full minute he sat rigidly still and silent, as though bereft of speech.

"That's news, Morag," he said, at last, in accents that went to Mary's heart. "I—didn't think. Tell me, Morag, is he big and handsome?"

"Yes, Callum."

Another long silence. "Bigger than me? Would he throw me at the wrestling, do you think?"

"I don't know, Callum."

Another minute Callum brooded; then in his shy, diffident way, "I'd like to see him awful well. Tell me about him, Morag."

And Mary told, as her heart dictated.

"Oh, ho," cried Callum, as one who suddenly finds the key to a mystery. "Oh, ho! a bard, like Ian Lom of the battles. That's it." Bards had a witchery, a magic which, of course, girls could not withstand. Callum regretted that he had never wooed the Muse.

"Better than Ian Lom of the battles, Callum," Mary answered quietly.

"Gosh!" ejaculated Callum, to whom Ian Lom represented the height and glory of bardic distinction. "Ian

Lom was a fine, fine bard when he got at the fighting. You used to sing me bits of his songs, Morag. Grand they were, grand. Does your bard of the South make songs, or what?"

"He makes songs, Callum."

"Better than Ian Lom. Gosh! but that's a wonder."

"Yes. If you like I'll say some of them over to you, Callum. Then you'll know."

"Och! it's wanting the English, I am, Morag." And after a ruminating pause, "He's going away, you say, across the big sea among wild black folk. Morag, if anything was to happen—" But Mary stopped him, as with a cry of fear.

"Don't, Callum dear, don't be saying things like that."

Callum looked hard at her a moment; then suddenly bowed his head, as though to hide his face. Looking up at last, he said gently:

"I will not be saying anything you do not like, Morag. No. I would kill the man who hurt you. Yes. And I will say this—your bard must be an extraorinar fine man if Morag likes him. That is all." Mary laid a shaking hand on his arm.

"Thank you, Callum dear, thank you for that. It's just like yourself. And oh! Callum, remember always, always what I told you."

Callum looked straight into her moist eyes.

"Oh! yes, I will remember. And—you will always be my little Morag; and what I have to say is this, God bless her." In the next breath he broke off. "Gosh! but they're having the fun at the dancing. Let us go down to them, Morag. Maybe we'll be in time for a reel."

He slid from his seat and held out his hand; she took it and swung down, lightly as a bird.

"Callum," she said softly, as they walked side by side, "you'll not be saying anything of this."

"Never a word," replied Callum promptly. "Never one

word, Morag. Them that's for asking questions will just have to whistle for their answer."

"You dear, good boy," said Mary, a catch in her voice. "And—and, Callum, there are plenty of other girls."

"Oh! yes," agreed Callum. "Plenty and plenty. No scarcity at all of girls; but it's God's truth there is only one Morag."

Mary was dumb.

CHAPTER 14

LATE that night Callum took a walk by himself along the lonely beach, to consider the shattering, underhand blow Fate had dealt him. Returning he chanced to pass the ale-house of Rory MacRory, and halted at the sound of revelry within.

"It's the great fun they're having," he muttered, shocked and disgusted that on such a night of disaster any one could have heart for riotous merriment. The squat, low-browed, thatched house was familiar to him—from the outside—as the chosen resort of sailormen addicted to strong waters. Wild scenes, he knew, were enacted behind those black walls. But he had never so much as looked into the place, though he passed the door almost daily and knew Rory as a man who did well out of other people's follies and uncurbed appetites.

By no reckoning was it a place of genteel reputation. But tonight, with the black fever working in his blood, Callum was not fastidious. Here it seemed was jollity, medicine for the down-hearted. Why not try a dose? Without more ado, he stepped inside. Rory, surprised and delighted to see a visitor of such quality, promptly emerged from the midst of a thick cloud of smoke, crying out a welcome.

"Is it Callum Og himself? Come in, come in. The sight of you's a cure for sore eyes. Yes, indeed. Just be making yourself at home. And what is it to be, Callum, my lad?" he enquired, as Callum with a half reckless, half guilty feeling slipped into the corner of a bench at the rear.

"What have you got, Rory?" The innocence of the question sent Rory off into spasms of mirth.

"Listen to him. What have I got? Well! now that's a thing to ask, as the miller said to the man that wanted

meal. It's asking you this I'll be, Callum, when did any man come to Rory and go away thirsty?"

"Never if you could help it, I am sure, Rory."

"And that's the true word as ever man spoke," agreed Rory, who had no false modesty in blowing his own trumpet. "Well! now hark you, Callum," he added, with a confidential wink, "the gaudger body and his master, the King, God bless them both and keep them out of harm's way, do not know or see everything. Tuts no! A deer from the hill, a salmon from the river, and a droppie from the stell ayont the clachan, eh! Ye ken? Will it be a thimbleful with the taste of peat reek that's as sweet as the lips of the lass you love, Callum?"

"Yes," said Callum, suppressing a quiver. "That should do."

His entrance and the effusive welcome of Rory momentarily interrupted the flow of joviality; but soon it was again in full flood. One man, Callum noticed, posed as cock of the roost. Black-bearded, bull-necked, coarse of face and truculent in every tone and gesture, he seemed a formidable fellow, and thoroughly aware of his own powers, either to delight or terrify, Callum judged. He had evidently been entertaining the company with a rousing account of his own heroic exploits in love and war, and ignoring the newcomer, resumed the recital to the accompaniment of many quaichs. Watching from his corner, Callum thought him a mighty drinker and a yet mightier boaster. "You may be a true man, but you haven't the face of one," he said to himself, in the words of the Gaelic proverb.

Bearing all before him, the hero of his own adventures went on bravely with tales which might have made Münchausen, the prince of liars, green with envy. Incidentally it came out that he was a native of Ayr; incidentally, too, Mauchline and Kilmarnock were mentioned. Callum took a quick sip of liquor.

"Mauchline," cried someone. "Let me see now. Isn't that the place where Archy Campbell's Morag was?"

"And who is Archy Campbell's Morag?" demanded the hero of the evening. "Is she a Mauchline lass?"

Oh, no, he was told, she had been there; and now she was at home in Campbeltown, getting ready to be married away in the South. Callum almost leaped to his feet; but putting on a tight curb, he managed to sit still, his pulses drumming.

"Married," echoed the sailor contemptuously. "And who's the white-livered lubber that's going to marry her?"

Now Mary had made no secret of her lover's name, quite the reverse, seeing she was a prospective bride. Two men gave it simultaneously. The effect was to send the sailor off into roars of laughter.

"Robert Burns," he cried, wiping his eyes. "Oh! Lord! Rantin' Rob Mossgiel," and he laughed again till the tears made streaks down his grimy face.

"You know him then?"

"Know him! Know Rob Mossgiel! It makes me drouthy to think o' him. Rory, another stoup, man, another stoup, quick, or I'll split wi' lauchin'."

Having drunk he gave particulars of Mossgiel's character and career with a gusto, punctuated by renewed roars of laughter. Callum sat as one petrified. The man thus described could never be the man that Morag was going to marry—Morag, gentle as a dove, pure as new fallen snow, who never in all her life had one base, unclean thought or feeling. No, no, it could not be. Flatly and utterly he refused to believe. This black-bearded boaster, this teller of nasty tales, this reviler and traducer, this foul, bloated midden-muck of a man, was a monstrous and malignant liar.

"So that's your Mossgiel for you," he ended, almost out of breath. "And this wench of yours, what's her name?"

is going to marry him. She must be a sort of any-port-in-a-storm light heels."

Callum felt his muscles tighten as at the sudden turning of a screw; but it was very quietly he asked:

"And what will be the meaning of light heels?" The sailor turned to him with a derisive guffaw.

"What will be the meaning of light heels? God, but it's innocent we are in the Hielands. Take a turn to Glesco, my mannie, and ye'll soon find oot."

"I was asking you the meaning of light heels in plain words," said Callum, with set lips.

"Oh! was you now, was you? Well, here goes." And he used a word which sent the blood hot and stinging into Callum's face.

"If you say that about Morag, I have to tell you it is a lie," he said, the menace of the curbed tempest in his tone.

The black-bearded bully leaned forward, his eyes alight with sudden fury.

"A lie, is it? And who in h—— are you to tell me that what I say is a lie?"

"I am telling you that if you mean the word for Morag, it is a lie," repeated Callum. "Will you take it back?"

Rory tried to make peace, but the sailor thrust him aside.

"Take it back," he laughed savagely. "That's likely. I'll have your liver out first, and then we'll see about taking it back. You—" and he used an epithet derogatory to all Highlanders.

"You may say what you like about me," Callum returned, "but you are not going to be speaking lies about Morag. So it's asking you to take it back, I am."

His face had gone deathly white. Beware of the man who goes from red to white in anger! But the sailor was past reckoning or understanding. With an oath he leaped to his feet, a huge, hulking figure of gorilla strength and

ferocity. Callum, too, rose, and stood as if obligingly awaiting the turn of events.

"Rory!" cried the sailor, his voice hoarse with passion, "make room, quick. There's somebody here that needs a lesson in manners, and, by God, he's going to get it."

With the growl of a charging tiger, he sprang at Callum, for a moment carrying him off his feet. But for a moment only. Precisely what happened next, Callum could never tell. For he was beside himself. He only knew that before he was well begun, hands were upon him trying to pull him off an inert heap on the floor, and a clamour of voices in his ears beseeching him not to kill.

"Callum Og, Callum Og," they pleaded, "think what it will be to have a dead man on your hands."

"Does he take it back then?" demanded Callum, panting less from exertion than from rage.

"Yes, yes, he takes it back, he takes it back, every word." Someone bent over the prostrate, writhing form. "Say you take it back. We don't want a murder and a funeral." There was an incoherent groan. "Yes, there, there he takes it back. Never a word of truth in it about Morag."

"I want to hear him saying it," retorted Callum, standing over the mangled heap of man and clothes. "Out with it, you black, boasting liar."

"Och! it's not fit for the speaking his poor mouth is," someone answered. "But he takes it back, yes, yes, for sure and certain, he takes it back."

Callum paused, still looking down at his adversary; then with a swift contemptuous shrug, he turned and strode towards the door. As he reached it, Rory plucked at his sleeve.

"A wee droppie of this, Callum," he quavered, holding out a pewter measure. "It will help you. Yes. It's the grand fighter you are. Yes. And he brought this on himself. Yes, yes."

"Thank you, Rory," said Callum, and drank off the

liquor at a gulp. Again he turned away; but instantly swung back.

"I am afraid some damage is done this night, Rory," he said apologetically. "Let me know how much it is, and I will pay."

"Pay," cried Rory, recovering his nerve. "Is it taking pay from your father's son, I'd be, do you think? Fuich, fuich, Callum. Just a bittie sport. And gosh! Callum he was just a wisp of straw in your hands. It's the proud lass Morag will be."

But that was a matter Callum could not discuss.

"Good-night, Rory. If they want me, they know where to find me."

And he passed into the darkness that was already near the dawn.

CHAPTER 15

EARLY next afternoon Mary was startled in the midst of her butter-making at the sheiling by the appearance of her young brother, Robert, breathless from haste and excitement.

"You're wanted down by at once," he told her, with a boy's bluntness.

"What's the matter, Robert?" she asked, alarmed by his manner. "Has anything happened; is anything wrong?"

"Oh! yes, something has happened," Robert answered. "And it will be better for you to come quick and not stand there staring and asking questions."

He was inclined to be mysterious; but on the way down she extracted the information that to begin with Callum Og had nearly killed a man. She stifled a cry of horror.

"Callum Og nearly killed a man?" she repeated aghast.

"Yes, and they say he did it well. Gosh! he's the boy."

"Robert, you're trying to put the fear on me," she cried, lapsing into the Gaelic idiom. "Callum Og would not hurt a fly, far less kill a man." Robert laughed.

"Oh! wouldn't he? You just wait and see, my lass."

"Then what is it?" she demanded. "I want to know. Tell me plain."

"A fight," replied Robert succinctly. "In Rory Mac-Rory's place. Gosh! wouldn't I just like to see Callum at it. I heard them say it was awful grand and terrible, too, and that every bone in the man's body is as good as useless. Yes. Oh! Callum's the boy to fight when the anger is on him."

It was hot and they were almost running; but Mary shuddered as in deadly cold. Callum Og, the good-natured, soft-mannered Callum guilty of what sounded like an attempt to murder. There must have been sore, sore temp-

tation; or had he suddenly gone mad from causes she could guess?

"Why did he do it?" she asked, holding her breath for the answer.

"I am not sure; but they are saying he got into an awful rage because the man said something about you."

"About me, Oh!" There was stark terror in the cry.

"Yes, and everybody is talking about you. Yes, and saying things about your man that you're so proud of. The sailorman that Callum nearly killed knows him." Mary's heart stopped.

"Knows Robin?"

"Yes, and he told a lot of things that put father in a terrible rage and made mother greet."

Mary felt suddenly so faint and giddy that she stumbled, and nearly fell.

"Robert dear," she panted, scarcely able to speak. "Tell me—what did the sailorman say?"

Robert did not know exactly, only it was all over the town and people were laughing and nodding and saying this and that among themselves.

"But you'll soon hear," he ended soothingly. "And it's stepping out we'd better be. Father said I was to bring you as fast as your feet could carry you."

Mary put a hand to her side, as though to ease an excruciating pain. Her father in a fury, her mother weeping; Robin talked about, slandered, she was sure; Callum maybe fleeing for his life. Her world was all at once reeling into chaos.

Her father heard the hideous story from many mouths, with some new detail, some added embellishment from each. The effect was as a staggering blow on the heart. Callum's fight might be nothing. Sailors in liquor were apt to have provoking tongues as he knew, and a little chastisement was wholesome at times. Besides the man, though heavily marked and mauled, was able to get back

to his ship, shamefaced over his defeat. But the tale of the man that Morag was going to marry, his little Morag, the joy of his life, the apple of his eye. It was paralyzing. He felt as if a thunderbolt had struck him, leaving him bruised and prostrate.

He was in when Mary arrived, white and terrified. A glance told her that the worst, the very worst had happened.

"I want you to tell me about this man in Mauchline," he began, almost in the first breath. Her mother set a stool and she sat down mechanically, her terror-stricken eyes hard on his face.

"What is it you want to know, father?" She could scarcely articulate; but the words came somehow.

"Everything, everything," he replied. "And if half the things I hear are true, it's not much that's good you'll have to tell me." Then with a look in which affection seemed to overcome sternness and the sense of wrong. "Morag, from the time you could speak until this day, I have never known you to tell a lie, not even to save yourself a whipping. As you love us all, ay, and be true to yourself, don't hide things now. Mind, you can never be glad or happy if you do."

And from faltering lips came the answer. "I will tell the truth, father."

"That's like yourself, Morag. Well! I have to tell you then that from all I hear the man you have promised to marry got a character last night in Rory MacRory's public house that makes me hot with shame. It is all over the town today."

"Robert told me something," Mary managed to say. "But, father, you are not going to believe the word of a drunken sailor."

"Others believe it, Morag, others believe it. That's the pity of it. Now tell me true is the man you have promised to take what they are saying?"

"I do not know what they are saying, father."

"I will tell you then. This is what they are saying." And in half a dozen dismal sentences, he repeated the tale as he had heard it.

"Is that true, Morag?" he asked, and seemed to hang on her answer.

For a moment Mary was dumb, as though she could not or dared not speak.

"Oh! my lamb, say it is not true," put in her mother, wiping her eyes. "Say it and we will believe you, no more. Just say it."

"Some people have a spite against Robin," Mary began, but her father stopped her.

"Yes. Yes, that is likely enough; but is what they are saying true?"

"Lies with little bits of truth in them," Mary answered, feeling as if she were swearing away Robin's life.

Her father drew a hand across his eyes, as though to clear them of mist.

"Then there is truth. Is it true what they are saying that he is never sober, and that he is wild with women? They are saying that other women have claims on him, and that they have put the Law after him. Yes, and they're saying that that's the reason he is going abroad. Trying to run away, that's what they are saying."

"He is not trying to run away," Mary replied with sudden vehemence. "If they say that, it is a lie, a black, downright lie."

"Yes, they are saying it and believing it. The sailor that Callum Og had the bit dispute with said he was packed and ready to smuggle his box off to Greenock just as soon as the ship is ready."

"Oh," cried Mary, almost fiercely. "How can people say such things? There is not a word of truth in it. And about his drinking, often and often I have seen him in Mr. Hamilton's house and with other people and myself, and

he was never the worse of drink. Do not believe it, father. People just say it out of spite, because—because he is cleverer than they are.”

“I am glad to hear you saying that, Morag, and I know it is true, because you say it. And it’s the way of some people to have a spite against others who are cleverer than themselves. Yes. But about being wild with the women, Morag, is that true?”

“It’s the women’s own fault,” returned Mary, all at once feeling her face on fire. “They’re wild about him, anyway some of them.”

Her father regarded her a moment with eyes in which love, pity and grief were blended.

“Then it is true,” he said tragically. “It is true.”

Mary had much to say on that point; but somehow she could not say it. She thought of Jean; but how explain the complications in that quarter? She dared not make the attempt. To her father her silence was the last straw. What the sailor said and people repeated with shrugs and nods of glee was true; and he should never be able to hold up his head again. He did not know the word “libertinage,” but he knew and understood the thing. And here it was flung in his face, flaunted to his disgrace before all his neighbours. He had no thought of blaming Morag; not for worlds would he wound her with unkind or unjust reflections. Whoever was guilty, she was innocent and pure. That was as certain as Holy Writ. But—but—

“Well!” he said, and his voice sounded desolate and far off. “Here is something to think about. It is telling your mother everything you’ll be, Morag, and—and then we’ll see.”

He turned as one stricken to the heart and left the house, his step all at once that of an old, old man. A moment Mary gazed after him, her whole being suspended in pity and dread. Then on a wild convulsive sob, she bowed her

head. Dropping to the floor, her mother put an arm about her.

"Mo vrone," she murmured brokenly. "Mo vrone."

Mary clutched her in a choking grip.

"Oh! mother," she cried, through her sobs; and again, "oh! mother."

Her mother held her tight. What was she after all but a child nestling, clinging for comfort in a time of need? After a long silence her mother ventured to ask:

"Morag, mo vrone, if—if what people say is true, may be it is not too late."

Mary sat up rigid, her wet eyes flashing.

"You—mean—?"

"That you can give him up, Morag. Yes, that's what I mean, mo vrone."

Mary sprang to her feet.

"Give him up, give Robin up? Mother, mother, ask me anything but that. No matter what they say, he is a good man—a good man," she repeated, as if to drive the fact home. "Do you think I do not know?"

CHAPTER 16

WITH Burns things were moving swiftly, rushing, as he felt, to a crisis. "The book" was passing slowly and painfully through the press of John Wilson, and would soon make its modest, timorous appeal to the public. Friends heartened him with golden prophecies; but to himself the venture was merely a pitiable attempt to get money enough for a passage into exile. For that desolate necessity his preparations went on steadily, not in secret, as enemies averred, but openly in the full light of day. The sole secret was his own hidden, unutterable misery.

James Armour looked on sourly, feeling defrauded of just revenge. He had not relented; on the contrary, hate became the more inflamed with each recurring thought that his intended victim was after all going scot free. In public he was still the object of taunts and jeers; in private his wife missed no occasion of informing him how *she* would deal with the black-avised villain. He listened and boiled with all the savagery of balked revenge.

Jean was a prisoner, breaking her heart and praying she might die. Several times despite the vigilance of her jailers, she saw Robin entering and leaving the Whitefoord Arms; and nothing but bars and stone walls kept her from going to him. Daddy Auld and Elder Fisher, alias Holy Willie, took counsel together and kept the rod carefully in pickle. When the time came Jean was to be played as trump card. Through all Burns busied himself putting his poor house in order, taking leave of friends at a distance, pouring out his heart to Mary, and incidentally, and as it were left-handedly, writing immortal poetry. For the moment his harp, like David's, gave forth more hearse-like airs than carols.

So the dreary days and feverish nights passed. Then,

quietly as the rising sun, came an event which the world was to register gratefully as epoch-making. On the thirty-first of July, 1786 appeared the Kilmarnock Edition of the Poems of Robert Burns. It came unheralded by any flourish of trumpets. Scotland ate and drank, dozed and snored, unwitting, uncaring that a red letter day was marked for all time in her calendar. Presently she was to cease snoring, wake up and rub her astonished eyes over this marvel she had produced, God knew how.

From obscure springs come rushing, mighty rivers. That slender octavo volume, the work of an untutored or self-tutored ploughboy, was to be an Avatar, a new creative spirit that had but to breathe upon dry bones, and lo! they lived. But there were no joy bells, no clashing cymbals at its birth.

At Mossgiel the excitement was a wild, heady dance of jubilation—except with one there. Taking up the book she could not read, Robin's mother examined it in silence, as though she were handling something inexpressibly precious and sacred (as it was to her); then looking up, her pride shining through tears, she said simply:

"May it prove a blessing to you, my dear." It was all she could trust herself to say. For her thoughts flew back to one who had taught Robin the best he knew. Ah! if only *he* could be there to see and read, how he would rejoice, even if his joy might be chastened. And Robin, understanding, kissed her silently and walked out of the house.

To Daddy Auld and his clique the book was a sure proof of its author's infamy, an incentive to redouble their zeal in persecution. It was the Lord's work.

"Nemesis," said Mr. Auld oracularly, "is never cheated of her prey in the end."

"Nae fear," agreed Mr. Fisher, feeling sure that since Mr. Auld used it the word "Nemesis" must mean some-

thing direly unpleasant. "We'll hae him yet, deil but we will."

"Exclude the deil, William," observed Mr. Auld. "We want no dealings with him."

"Ay, ay, to be sure," assented William, made genial by the excellence of Mr. Auld's punch. "We dinna need him. We're up to the job oorsels. And for certain the book wi' its fleerin' and sneerin' at a' that's godly, as I hear, is just fit for the hangman to burn, no to speak o' the man himsel."

"That's our mark, William," said Mr. Auld quickly. "That's our mark."

"Sure and certain," agreed William, taking another liberal sip of punch.

To most of his rustic neighbours who rubbed shoulders with Mossiel at Kirk or market, slapped him jovially on the back, jested and caroused with him, he was just a country lad like themselves, with a taste for rhyming, the fruit of free and easy lovemaking. The book was a good joke, or at most, an object of mere curiosity. They, too, could make love, though with more caution; likewise they could rhyme about it, were it "worth while fashin'." To make screeds of rhyme about Scotch Drink, the Deil, the Lasses, Haggis, Holy Fairs, Jolly Beggars, and the riotous delights of Poesie Nancy's Shebeen—pooh! they could do that themselves, even in the state of hilarity which is designated "bung fou." Some did, incited by his example. Their bright effusions have alas! gone down into oblivion.

Much to the author's surprise, the bantling prospered amazingly. The first edition was off Mr. Wilson's shelves almost as fast as it could be handed out; what was more, in a land of thrift not a single buyer returned with an unwanted book and a request to have three misspent shillings refunded.

That the essential touch of comedy and satire should

not be lacking, it was decreed that while the poet was daily winning laurels, the man should undergo a drastic process of castigation. Dropping the Law in disgust as shuffling and ineffective, Mr. Armour turned, as we have seen, to the Kirk for vengeance. For that purpose, Jean was to be made the instrument, partly as a penance for her own sins, but chiefly as the only available means of getting at her vile accomplice, her real instigator in crime. There were hurryings to and fro, and eager confidences between Mr. Auld, Mr. Armour, and Mr. Fisher. Mr. Auld "on information laid" had a plain duty to perform, which he should neglect at his peril. Mr. Armour and Mr. Fisher had their own driving motives.

Accordingly, the culprit, Robert Burns, was summoned to appear before the congregation in order to hear the tale of his enormities, and, if he were wise, submissively bare his back to the rod. He would have scornfully disregarded the summons—but for one consideration. The terror of the Kirk, worse even than the fear of perdition, was a thing to give the most defiant sinner pause. Perdition was remote and at worst a contingency; the Kirk was a very present and powerful tyranny. It could very literally damn, if not before God, most thoroughly and effectively before men. Besides, Burns, too, had his own motives. The ordeal of confession and rebuke would be sharp physic; but in one all-important respect it was welcome. It would rid him of an incubus, a tormenting, throttling nightmare; in other words, it would rid him forever of the Armours. Moreover, as his second experience of the kind, he could thole without deadly injury to his pride.

So it came that for three consecutive Sundays he stood up in one part of the congregation, while Jean stood in another, to hear themselves called ugly names and held up as appalling examples of carnal depravity. Divers others stood with them in similar plight, for as Mr. Auld, more in anger than in sorrow, remarked, their sin was the

prevalent disgrace of Mauchline. Throughout the proceedings, the two chief sinners never so much as looked at each other, so that interested spectators whispered privily that the breach seemed to be complete. The result for Burns was freedom. Whatever moral responsibility attached to "the writing" he gave to Jean was now cancelled. The purpose to which she and hers had forced him was at last accomplished. He got his certificate as "a single man," and was done with her forever.

It was a wrench; he was sorry for her; but against her father, and especially against her vixen of a mother, who had banged the door in his face when he wished to make peace, his anger was implacable. To his old chum, John Richmond, he wrote: "Spare the poor, ill-advised girl, though may all the furies that rend the injured, enraged lover's bosom await her mother until her latest hour." The sentiment was no flourish of rhetoric.

Accounts settled, Burns found himself with twenty pounds in pocket, more than double the sum needed for his passage to Jamaica. Heartened, and momentarily elated, he promptly proposed a new Edition, whereupon Mr. Wilson raised his eyebrows in pained astonishment. What was Mossgiel thinking of? Did he imagine that the douce, close-fisted people of Scotland were tumbling over each other to buy poetry? Mossgiel must not be vain. Besides, and here was the crucial factor, books were so costly, so dreadful costly to produce. Mr. Wilson made a lightning calculation. The small item of paper alone would be twenty-seven pounds. Perhaps Mossgiel could see his way to advance that sum. Mossgiel could not; so the idea of a second edition was dropped; and he turned dismally to the prospect of Jamaica. Once more it was driven into heart and mind and soul that Scotland had no place for him, did not want him.

He wrote to Mary that the meeting at Greenock was drawing very near, and adjured her not to disappoint him.

"As if I would dream of such a thing," Mary thought, in a transport of excitement. She worked herself into a fever, debating whether she should tell him by letter what had befallen in Campbeltown, or wait until they met? Or perhaps it would be best not to tell him at all. Why should she, why? Well for her fond heart that she could not guess how the Fates were to decide for her.

At Mossgiel preparations narrowed rapidly to the final details. In his cock-pit of a study he wrote "The Farewell," "The Gloomy Night is Gathering Fast," "A Bard's Epitaph," and to prove he was still his irrepressible self, "The Lass of Ballochmyle," with some rollicking, half-defiant pieces, meant to be gay and carefree. Then early one morning, Gilbert drove off with a cart containing a trunk heavily corded and labeled "Care of Captain Smith, The *Nancy*, Greenock," to be delivered for transport to the carrier at Kilmarnock.

In the evening, Burns visited Mr. and Mrs. Gavin Hamilton. Always at ease in that hospitable household, he gave his varying moods free play. Often his lightning audacities startled even while they charmed and dazzled. But tonight, the satirist and humorist were in abeyance. He was grave with the gravity of one who treads the wine-press, and finds life a "galling load," a thicket of thorns, with here and there a delusive rose. But the fascinated listeners thought that he was never more truly himself. David was not more human; Solomon scarcely wiser. Here, Gavin told himself, was one who looked and saw and understood where others merely fumbled blindly, one, too, who expressed his insight and his wisdom with the flashing clearness of Genius.

And how was Scotland showing her appreciation of her gifted son? By thrusting him from her in a storm of persecution. Gavin felt abashed and guilty as if the disgrace, the odium, were his own. True, with all the piercing insight and Socratic wisdom, went the strangest streaks

of imprudence and folly. What then? Why, that Robert Burns must be taken as God made him, a miracle to the discerning, a rank offence to the stupid, the complacent and the self-righteous. He was born, it seemed, to prove how incompatibles "meet, mix, and unite."

How Genius, th' illustrious father of fiction,
Confounds rule and law, reconciles contradiction.

To Gavin the splendour of the gifts would have atoned for, blotted out all faults were they ten times multiplied.

The visitor stayed late; but when he had supped and said, "Good night," he did not take the straight road to Mossgiel. Instead, as if drawn by a power he could not resist, he descended into the unlighted darkness of the Cowgate. He was close to the Whitefoord Arms, so close that he could hear sounds of revelry from the taproom, and even recognize voices; but tonight he was in no mood for jovial company. Choosing a spot of especial blackness under a high wall, he stood looking towards a certain small window, once a beacon of delight.

It was dark, of course. No signal of joy there now, no love-light to let him know *she* was astir and coming to the tryst. After all that had passed, what a fool he was, what a sentimental fool, to stand there in the lonely night, gazing at a blank window. Twice he wheeled to go, and twice turned back. Was it telepathy, was it some inexplicable feeling akin to his own, some subtle chord of memory and longing? Suddenly his breathing stopped. The figure of a woman appeared in the room above, bearing a lighted candle. Setting the candle on a table she advanced to the window, and gazed out, as though her eyes pierced the darkness where he stood. With all his gifts of expression, he could not have described his emotions in that moment. All time, all sense, all memory seemed to be fused and suspended in one burning instant.

Jean! He felt her presence like an electric shock; even

in the dark he could see those eyes, black as his own, glow; oh! Heaven! how they could glow. Her breath was on his cheek; her vows, passionate as love could make them, in his ears. Jean, Jean! Fortunately she stood but a moment, a moment, however, which condensed for him an age of suffocating emotion. Turning she took up the candle and disappeared, once more and for the last time, leaving him alone in the night.

“Exiled, abandoned, forlorn,” he murmured tragically.

CHAPTER 17

THE trunk containing nearly all his worldly possessions was gone; but Burns lingered. At the last moment the brigantine *Nancy* was found unsuitable, and he had to await the sailing of another ship. That delay, as it fell out, was to prove the unsuspected pivot of Fate. Chafing, miserably, morbidly restless, now impatient to be gone and end suspense, now hoping against hope that somehow, in some unimagined way, he might still escape the doom of exile, Burns threw himself for a last vehement spell into farm work. Intense, absorbing, physical exertion might stifle the harpies that tore at his heart. Gilbert noted his furious activities, wondering how human strength could sustain them; his mother with an aching comprehension of what lay behind all this demonic energy. Robin was killing himself to keep misery at bay.

On Sunday he went to church with his neighbours, because it was the custom. One noon, while he listened to the minatory explosions of Mr. Auld, an event of some moment in his history was happening scarcely a stone-throw away. He heard of it in the late afternoon, when young Adam Armour ran out to Mossgiel, big with importance and excitement. He heard the news without comment, gave Adam a shilling for his trouble and went off by himself to digest yet another sinister fact in the situation. The same night with a brave show of blitheness, he made his own announcement to John Richmond, his whilom colleague of the Court of Equity, now in Edinburgh:

"Wish me luck, my dear Richmond. Armour has just brought me a fine boy and girl at one throw. God bless the little dears. Green grow the rashes, O."

But that night he did not sleep.

Several days later, when the sharper effects of the shock were wearing off, there came to him in the fields a messenger, hot foot from Gavin Hamilton. A note scribbled in galloping haste enclosed a letter which Gavin considered important.

"Come to see me at once," he wrote. "You would have had this letter ten days ago, but for the fact that, as you know, I have been away. I feel like throwing my hat in the air. Again *Sursum corda*, my friend."

Burns kept that appointment, though with less of leaping hope than Gavin.

"Interesting, Gavin," he said, handing the letter back. "What do you think it means?"

"That fortune's knocking," replied Gavin crisply. "There's for you. The Kirk actually smiling on us with a fervent God speed. My word! I thought of sending a copy to Daddy Auld but decided to spare the dear man's feelings. He would be so horribly grieved and affronted."

"More considerate than he ever showed himself with you," observed Burns drily.

"Pray for them that despitefully use you," rejoined Gavin, with a twinkle. "However let that pass. As I say it's fortune's knock. Lawrie, minister of Loudon, sent it to me. You see it's addressed to him. The explanation is this—in a fit of pure delight and beneficent enthusiasm, off he posts a copy of the Poems to the High Court of Criticism in Edinburgh, and here's the verdict. Do you happen to know anything of the judge, T. Blacklock?"

"Nothing, except that I have heard he is stone-blind, poor soul, and suffers from the additional misfortune of being a poet."

"Plus an arbiter of literary taste among the cock-nosed gentry of the Modern Athens," supplemented Gavin cheerfully. "Sits on Mount Olympus, or is it Parnassus, or maybe, by the springs of Helicon, dispensing the glory which is called Fame. Gad, Mossgiel, you've gone and landed plump

among the high gods—without knowing it.” He laughed infectiously. “The Lord in his mercy has vouchsafed them a good conceit of themselves up there. Here we are and wha’s like us? And to see them mounted on their prancing steeds is a brave sight. Even Samuel Johnson thought it worth while being civil to them. I was a youngster in Edinburgh at the time and mind the commotion well.”

“You actually saw him?” said Burns, with sudden interest. He knew Johnson from afar as a sort of English Zeus, a Sassenach Moses, who gave laws to the world of letters, and did it like a despot.

“Many a time,” answered Gavin, nothing loath to display a treasured memory. “And with reverence be it spoken, I wasn’t impressed. To my profane young fancy he suggested a sea-lion flopping and floundering about on huge fins. I think his feet were a bit splay. Anyway Mr. Samuel Johnson was no beauty. Of course, I was an irreverent young ruffian, chokeful of presumption and ignorance. They generally go together.”

Burns laughed. “Some would say, Gavin, that you keep up your irreverence. But evidently the great Cham was not an Adonis.”

“No more than your humble servant,” laughed Gavin in turn. “To me he was a sort of menagerie wonder led round by his stodgy, podgy keeper, Jamie Boswell, to awe and astonish the smug little deities of Edinburgh. And, my word! weren’t they awed and servile. It was the great beast behemoth among the minnows and the minnows showing off for all they were worth. Well! Blacklock was singled out for special honour. ‘I am very glad to see you, dear Doctor Blacklock,’ says Samuel in his courtliest manner. It was a kind of joke at the time; all the same, the honour caused real twinges of jealousy. And that, Mossgiel, is your man. I’d give something to be in your shoes.”

"You'd find them pinch damnably, Gavin," Burns smiled wanly.

"I'd cock my beaver, anyway," retorted Gavin, with a touch of impatience. Fired to a generous enthusiasm in his friend's interest, he was a little piqued that Burns did not instantly catch fire at his flame. "Here," he continued warmly, "is Blacklock, one of the first critics of the time, saying with emphasis that the poems are good, damn good. No, no, I libel a distinguished and pious man. He'd never be profane. Let's see his actual words, 'Cannot be too much admired, nor too warmly approved.' By Heaven, Mossgiel, the poet-laureate, may his laurels never wither, would give half his long ears to have it said of his work. And, to be practical, note that Blacklock wants a second edition. Lord! man, are you feeling quite sober over it all?"

"As sober as a whole bench of judges, Gavin," was the quiet answer. "Just at present I have much to make and keep me in that blessed and virtuous condition."

"I have of late, but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth," Gavin quoted ironically.

"Gavin," cried Burns, with sudden and startling earnestness. "You love me; for God's sake, don't laugh at me. For as certainly as the sun shines this minute, my estimate of myself, my performances and my prospects is down, down many degrees below zero."

Gavin gazed a moment as if struck.

"Why! Mossgiel, what's the meaning of this?" he asked, as one should say, "My dear fellow, have you gone mad?"

"You're my friend and I'll tell you," was the answer. "I mean exactly what I say. And, Gavin, you're the only man alive I'd tell it to. I'd blow out my brains rather than own it to anyone else. But the fatal truth is that of me, it has been written *Behold whatsoever his hand under-*

taketh, it shall not prosper. Every day, my friend, every hour that prophecy is being fulfilled."

"Nonsense," retorted Gavin, almost angrily. "Stark, staring nonsense. Do you imagine Blacklock is just playing a joke?"

"No."

"Then what do you think his letter means?"

"Oh! I know precisely what it means. I see through it and behind it. As your friend Johnson said of the dancing dog, the wonder is, not that it dances badly, but that it dances at all. So with me. In his surprise that a ploughman should be able to string two stanzas of rhyme together without making a fool of himself, Dr. Blacklock is carried away. That is the meaning."

"That's not how I read it," retorted Gavin sharply.

"Don't be angry with me, Gavin. I among the great sons of song? I am vain, ten times, ten score times vainer than you or anyone else ever dreamed or suspected. But my vanity stops dead there. My little incursion! What is it but a pebble dropped into a big, deep pool? A moment the water is rippled; then the tiny circles fade and die. The pebble is lost in oblivion."

Gavin heaved a hard, deep breath. He knew his friend's mercurial temperament and with what baffling changes he ran the gamut of feeling. And certainly Robin had much to distract, exasperate, and depress, much even to make him heedless of his soaring fame as a poet. But the black mood must be fought, not fostered, or played up to, like a sick man's appetite. Gavin was full of pity and understanding; but not for worlds would he insult Burns with platitudes of facile sympathy. Something quite different was needed, a hand to help, perhaps even a spur to prick him out of the slough of despond.

"What it is to be a poet," he said, with an air of lightness, meant to mark his sense of absurdity. "I have heard that for all gifts and graces bestowed upon us, we pay as

it were through the nose. When Heaven bestows Genius, it, or mankind on its behalf, often exacts a cruel *quid pro quo*. Up and down, up and down, at one end of the scale rapture, at the other gloom."

"With Fate as tax collector," said Burns.

"For myself, I have never made a rhyme in my life," Gavin pursued, as though there had been no interruption. "But in my slow prosaic way, I recognize facts when I see them. And, my dear Mossgiel, as sure as you sit there, this is fortune's knock."

"Just your partiality, Gavin."

"I'd much rather you called it common sense. A certain poet-friend of mine who sometimes puts on his robes of wisdom and gives us the real stuff of truth, has this sage advice:

"To catch Dame Fortune's golden smile
Assiduous wait upon her.

That, sir, is worth all the pretty, dismal things ever said about pebbles dropped in pools, yes, fifty times over."

And neatly caught in his own net, Burns could not help laughing.

"That's better," remarked Gavin briskly. "You've made me feel as dry as a red herring." He looked at his watch. "They'll be having their four o'clock in Johnny Doo's. Wouldn't it be a good place to consider ways and means of catching that golden smile my friend speaks of?"

But Burns shook his head. "You are God's own trump for goodness, Gavin," he said, in a tone that meant more than the words. "But not today. If you don't mind, my dear friend, we'll do our devising where we are."

Just then nothing would induce him to enter the Cowgate.

CHAPTER 18

GAVIN was right. Burns tormented himself much over the question of ways and means, and could find no convincing answer. To clarify his mind he visited Mr. Lawrie at the beautiful manse of St. Margaret's Hill by Irvine Water and for a little, at least, was charmed out of his black spirits by song and dance and the unreserved cordiality of an admiring family.

"Of course," Mr. Lawrie remarked, as though doubt were out of the question. "Of course you will fall in with Dr. Blacklock's suggestion. Even poets cannot afford to miss their chance. There is a tide in the affairs of men, you know. I am glad and proud, Mr. Burns, to be in at the beginning. When Scotland's poet is acclaimed it may be my name will be remembered."

Gavin too grew more ardent, more insistent. But there were so many things the advisers did not know or could not understand that their well meant counsels rather hindered than helped to a decision.

At times Blacklock's letter seemed a clear call; at other times it became a mere *ignis fatuus*, luring a hapless poet deeper and deeper into the morass. From early youth it was his habit to weigh himself critically against other men, and comparisons were invariably flattering to self-esteem. But the men were uncouth, unlettered, often boorish rustics. Here the scales were quite differently loaded. Easy enough to shine among rude boozers in Nance Tinnock's tavern, the festive, not too refined wits in the Whitefoord Arms, the Tarbolton Masonic Lodge, or even the jocund spirits of Kilmarnock and Ayr. But Edinburgh with its high literary polish! Something cried, "Hooly, I rede you, honest man, tak' tent, you'll show your folly."

Moreover, Jean had gone and complicated matters most

frightfully. The ungrateful, perfidious girl had behaved vilely. All the same, honour was honour. Could the lusty singer of manly chivalry and the domestic virtues turn a deaf ear to this new tender call of nature? Never while he had breath. Yet what path was there out of the bewildering, heart-rending perplexities?

At the same time Fame had the trumpet full-blast to her mouth. Wherever the poems went there were shouts of glee and a cry for more. It was as if an ironic fate held the intoxicating cup to his lips, with the mocking invitation, "Drink, drink, it is a glorious draught. Never mind if the chalice is poisoned." It was poisoned, and God help him! he was himself the poisoner. His own worst enemy! Could Destiny devise a crueller doom than that?

In a gloom, an anguish of heart and soul, such as great spirits alone are capable of feeling, he took fresh stock of himself. The inventory appalled and dismayed. But not for worlds would he let the world behold his torments. Pride, the last thing to capitulate in the stubborn heart, raised its crest defiantly. A social and moral brigand, they called him. Very well! So be it. He would play the part, so that censors, snobs, Pharisees, and hypocrites should have more to talk about. What was it he once sang in derision? "Let them prate about decorum who have characters to lose." It seemed he had none. People said that Mossiel was having a last wild fling before quitting the country and having it with an abandon that made timid sinners gape. The Reverend William Auld and Elder Fisher took punch and snuff together, remarking sapiently, "We knew it, we knew it. A brand meant for the burning cannot escape."

Greatly daring Gavin ventured to remonstrate. Burns showed no resentment; he only laughed bitterly.

"I told you, Gavin," he replied. "I told you. My dear and honoured friend, I am a man under a curse, a poor hare-brained creature born to be the sport of furies."

"I think Mossgiel has gone mad," Gavin confided to his wife. "He neither goes nor properly stays, flings away chances and wastes his little substance. I declare to you, the prodigal son was never half so daft."

She was grieved and horrified. "Can nothing be done?" she asked earnestly. "He has a deep regard for you. Can't you do anything with him?"

"Anything with him?" cried Gavin. "You know him. Robert Burns is not exactly an easy man to deal with when he takes the bit between his teeth. Well! the pace is too hot to last. This can't go on. Something must happen, and happen soon."

One heavenly influence still had power to comfort and uplift. Amid all the distress and confusion the thought of Mary was a magic balm. Out of the darkness her gentle face rose before him, soft, radiant and innocent; he saw her smile, her look of pure, trusting love; and for one divine moment his troubles vanished. Mary! The very name, murmured to himself, made his heart swell and his eyes overflow. None knew of that soothing, irradiating influence; but it was remarked at Mossgiel that sometimes Robin's face shone with unmistakable happiness. To some there it was the best of tonics to see it.

His heart smote him that owing to a combination of evils and distractions he had of late been a little remiss as a lover. He would atone for that. So he wrote Mary a letter which would prove that he did not forget, that in truth she became dearer and ever dearer as time passed. As an item that was sure to exhilarate he told her with some detail of the triumphant success of the poems.

"It astonishes me," he owned frankly. "And what do you think? The modest little book has actually made its way to Edinburgh, and, more amazing still, is welcomed with a rousing salvo from one of the biggest of the big guns there. As you know, my love, I have never been deficient in vanity. This has so puffed it up that it is in

some danger of exploding. Then I am to dine at Catrine House with another big gun, Professor Dugald Stewart. So you see, my Mary, I am sprachlin' up the brae. Indeed I am almost persuaded to believe that my poor native wood notes wild are after all the real thing. Rejoice with me, dearest.

"But on the practical side—and so long as one must eat just in order to live one is forced to be practical—I cannot see that all these honours and flatteries are likely to make much, or any difference. Jamaica still looms as the only refuge. The *Nancy* wouldn't do: but another ship is getting ready and with her I say farewell to my native land, may God bless her, for all her ill treatment of me. So my ever dearest be ready for our meeting. It is the one thing at present for which I live. Night and day I dream of it. To have my Mary in my arms once more, even if only for a moment of time, is a thought that fills me with ecstasy, makes me tremble with joy. Your love, dearest, is my most precious possession on earth: and while I have it I shall count myself rich and blessed. My love, you are my all in all.

"I have much to tell you, much to decide with the help of your sweet, wise counsel. Pray for me. 'In thy orisons be all my sins remembered'; and may they be forgiven."

That letter was never read by Mary. While he was writing it she was already on her way to Greenock, full of joy, full of anxiety, for the great meeting on which so much depended. One evening, some ten days later while the whole Mossgiel family were together in the kitchen the post brought a letter for Robin. He took it and stepped to the window to read. His face was partly hidden; but the curious watchers noticed that suddenly, as if smitten to the heart, he blanched a deathly white. Then without a word he turned swiftly and walked out, the letter trembling in his hand.

Mary was dead.

PART II

CHAPTER 1

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met—or never parted—
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

TO GET away from evil tongues and especially to keep that sacred promise made by the banks of Ayr, Mary secured a situation in Glasgow, a very menial one. It happened that at the same time her brother, Robert, was to be apprenticed to a carpenter in Greenock. His father and mother accompanied the boy to see him settled, and Mary went with them. Before he could begin work Robert fell ill of typhus fever. Mary nursed him. But as he grew well she caught the infection. From the dingy closet of a room, in a dismal back street of Greenock, her confused and distracted thoughts went out to Robin. Of late she had felt a little neglected. Had he, could it be that he had forgotten? With frightful vividness she recalled her own words, "I'd die, Robin, if you forgot." Merciful God! Were her words coming true? She did not breathe his name, save once in delirium when suddenly her face kindled as with leaping joy and she held out her arms calling, "Robin, Robin." But one day being alone and for the moment clear in mind, she gathered all her strength and got out of bed. Taking the Bible Robin had given her from a secret corner she wet her finger and slowly and with immense difficulty rubbed out the names. That done she crept or staggered back to bed, shaking, light-headed, yet knowing, with the eerie, awesome prescience of the dying that she had taken farewell of love and life.

Some days after receiving the fatal news Burns met Gavin Hamilton by chance in a Mauchline street.

"We have just had sad news," Gavin hastened to tell him. "You remember our little Highland Mary?" Burns nodded. "Well, poor girl, she's dead. It came as a great shock to us all. It seems she died suddenly of a malignant fever in Greenock. My wife is distressed, and poor little Charlotte, who never lost hope of having her favourite back again, is weeping her eyes out."

"It won't bring Mary back," said Burns, as Gavin thought with a strange lack of feeling. "By the way," Burns went on, as if his mind were full of other things. "You will be pleased to hear that I mean to take your advice after all, and try a fling with Lady Fortune in Edinburgh."

He did not tell that what the eloquence and urging of friends had failed to do the death of Mary had done. The meeting at Greenock being now among the things which could never be, his heart turned vehemently against the place itself. Jamaica too became unbearably abhorrent. It was for *her* sake he had finally resolved to brave the broiling of a torrid sun; now that inspiring, sustaining motive was dead. Of course it was like his baleful star that, just as he was about to fold her again in his arms, she should be snatched away, hidden from his sight for ever.

At a stroke all his plans, all his fondest hopes were swept into the bottomless pit. Other experiences infuriated or maddened or depressed; this crushed. Strange, awful thought—never again so long as time was time could he do the smallest thing for Mary. She no longer needed him; how he needed her, God alone knew. Yet all sense of loss or suffering must be shut fast under iron lids. It was Lear's pathetic, "Down, thou climbing sorrow," only unlike Lear he must hide his grief as though it were not.

They had a walk together, Gavin joyous and exuberant that at last his good counsel was prevailing. He knew of course that common sense must win. To turn a blind eye to the beckoning fortune would be simply to fly in the

face of Providence, and Providence did not easily forgive the purblind sons and daughters of folly who rejected its favours. Burns smiled at his friend's enthusiasm.

"What a preacher the pulpit has lost, Gavin," he remarked quietly.

Gavin, in fact, had his own secret motives. He had staked his judgment on Burns as a racing man stakes his reputation and his cash on a miraculous colt of his own discovery; and Burns must vindicate his confidence, not in Mauchline or Kilmarnock or Ayr, but where the high gods sat distributing prizes. And for once Burns was docile and eager.

"You'll enjoy it," Gavin assured him, "only don't forget one small thing in the social life up there. When you take the air of an evening and hear the cry of 'gardy loo, gardy loo' from somewhere near the sky jump quick and jump far."

"A la Mr. Tobias Smollet," smiled Burns, who had read "Humphrey Clinker" and thus got some notion of the primitive sanitary methods of Edinburgh.

"Whew," said Gavin, pretending to hold his nose, "enough to turn the stomach of an ostrich."

"Stout stomachs as well as hard heads up there, by all accounts," laughed Burns. "And what's a whiff of the cesspool? Just one more touch of nature?"

In three days he was off on a pony borrowed from an early friend, George Reid, farmer of Barquharie, by Ochiltree, a modest man who did a kindly act and found it fame. It was near the end of a rough wild autumn. Weather and roads were foul; but for at least part of the journey the traveller fared so festively that he almost forgot physical discomfort. For the fame of the poems had run like wild fire from farm to farm, from parish to parish; and farmers, proud to see one of themselves blaze into celebrity, fell over one another in providing incense and entertainment. Burns, who rarely turned his back on

the festive spirit, was exhilarated and enchanted even to the extent of despising miry ways and sluicing, soaking rains. What he got in hospitality he repaid in wit; so that it was said, "Ay the poet's a wonder, but the man's the man for a' that."

On the evening of the second day his straining eyes caught sight of the smoke-weathered turrets of Edinburgh dimly visible under scudding rain-clouds. He halted his pony to gaze. So that was the far-famed modern Athens. The modern Athens! As he lived, a palpable libel on the city of the Violet Crown, unless travellers were arrant liars. For information he hailed a passing pedestrian.

"Ay yon's it," the man answered sourly. "Yon's the damn hole they ca' auld Reekie."

"Why do you call it that?" asked Burns with a smirk of amusement at the man's black countenance.

"Why div I ca' it that?" replied the man, passing from sourness to anger. "Because that's what it is, a damn stinkin' hole. Ye widnae hae me tell a lee, would ye?"

"Not for worlds," Burns assured him. "But why are you so hard on the capital of our country?"

The man spat in disgust. "I'll tell ye. They keep whiskey there that burns the throat oot o' ye, and when ye drink it for want o' better they jyle ye for bein' fou and refusin' to take sauce frae the poliss. Where's the sense o' that? Ay, splash a puir man—and girn ye ugly deevil."

A great coach with outriders lumbered past, splashing them with mud; a flunkey sitting behind turned and grinned at them insolently.

"D'ye ken the beast?" asked the man, after delivering a volley of curses. "No. That's the livery o' her they ca' the Duchess o' Gordon. I got a glisk o' hersel lauchin' and carryin' on wi' somebody inside. Ye'll hae heard o' *her*. Ay and ye'll hae heard o' her o' Babylon as weel. Jean Gordon would lick her to sticks at her ain game.

You're for auld Reekie, ye say. Am sorry for ye. Look to yersel, that's my advice."

"Thanks," returned Burns. "Solomon never gave a wiser or better."

"Solomon," cried the man. "He'd be a fool past redemption that gaed and did like Solomon, merryin' every woman he could lay hands on, good, bad and indifferent forby a wheen o' the other sort. Are ye a merried man?"

"No," said Burns.

"Weel, I am, and I think Solomon the biggest fool in Christendom."

And he went his way, snorting contempt.

Burns watched him a moment in mingled amusement and sympathy; then he turned his eyes again to the ragged coronal of smoke and storm-wrack ahead. What lay under it for him? In his heart he had often likened himself to Don Quixote. Did ever that scatter-brained adventurer set lance in rest for a madder tilt than this? But he was committed. He stroked his pony's draggled mane, as they trudged on.

"My poor beastie, you're dead weary, and I am far from gay: but whatever there may be for me at our journey's end you shall have hot mash and a double feed of corn to ease your aching ribs."

As he entered the city night was falling. In late November it comes early in that northern latitude and brings with it an arctic chill. His first care was for his drooping pony. Having seen it housed, fed, groomed and bedded, he set out in quest of the only friend or acquaintance he had in Edinburgh, John Richmond, whilom clerk to Gavin Hamilton and a leading actor in the old Court of Equity frolics. Like himself John was a man of experience. To be in the fashion he had had his own adventures in gallantry, one consequence being his sudden departure from Mauchline without the formality of leave-taking. The task of finding him was not easy, for he was domiciled in an

odd corner of Baxter's Close, Lawnmarket, "first scale stairs on the left hand going down, first door on the stair." As he explored ill-lighted, evil-smelling lanes and alleys and closes the searcher thought of Gavin's warning about "Gardy loo," but happily it was still too early for the emptying of slops from upper windows.

In the cordiality of his welcome the trials—and fears—of the search were instantly forgotten. Richmond, scarcely believing his eyes, bubbled and overflowed with delight, wrung his friend's hand as if he would wring it off, asked a dozen questions in a breath, and without waiting for answers ended:

"Of course you'll stay with me. The accommodation is not palatial. But we can manage two a bed, without falling out."

To cap the arrangement Mrs. Carfrae, Richmond's landlady, was called in. Burns has sketched her character: "A staid, sober, piously disposed, sculduddry-abhorring widow," a truly devout soul, in fact, with an overwhelming sense of other people's sins. Even as she stood dubiously surveying the mud-splashed figure of Burns she was reminded of the kind of wickedness for which there was no salvation.

"There they go again, Mrs. Carfrae," Richmond remarked at the sound of riotous mirth from the floor above.

"Ay," said Mrs. Carfrae, with compressed mouth. "There they go again. Dochters o' Belial wi' their gaudy-grin, their drinkin' and singin' o' shamefu' songs. Weel! let them look oot. The day's comin' when they'll weep and wail and gnash their teeth owre the cup o' God's wrath."

"Oh! poor souls," put in Burns. "They may take a thought and mend."

But Mrs. Carfrae was not to be done out of her fearful vision of judgment. "Them mend," she retorted, "that'll be when Satan gies up sin and not a minute sooner. I

ken them. But I'm forgettin'," she added apologetically. "Ye want yer friend to bide wi' ye, Maister Richmond. I think we can manage it. Ye pay me half a croon a week. Would sixpence mair be owre muckle?"

Mr. Richmond promptly answered it would not. So sixpence extra it was, or three shillings for the two.

CHAPTER 2

NEXT day Burns spent in bed. His journey of sixty miles over sludgy, ruddy roads in wind and rain with an edge of sleet, plus the effect of festivities by the way, left him with a feeling of fatigue and a desire for rest. Besides having crossed his Rubicon it was necessary to take quiet, honest stock of himself, his resources and prospects. The result was scarcely heartening. The death of Mary had fallen like the stroke of a mighty sword, cleaving his life in two and for ever cutting off the better part. As he lay moodily, feverishly thinking of what might have been, she stole in and gazed at him with sad, reproachful, penetrating eyes. Ah! Mary, Mary, dear departed shade! Her lips once so warm and red were cold and pale now, and her look of disappointed, anguished love was heart-breaking.

"I have left you, Robin," it said pitifully. "Oh! my dear, I have left you. You see, after all your vows you forgot Robin; so what could I do but die?" He was glad that none could see him in that moment.

On the second day he went out in the spirit of a prospector exploring a new land. The weather was atrocious, as Edinburgh weather so often is, but he was accustomed to severities of weather. Halting before bookshops he studied their dirty cobwebbed windows and even peered into their dark dust-choked interiors. The works of his favourites, Ramsay, Fergusson, and others of that ilk were there; but never a sign of the white label of Kilmarnock. Of course not. Only an overweening vanity could expect that Edinburgh should know anything of his rude plough-boy rhymes. Edinburgh cared nothing either for him or his poetry. Sometimes a snuffy, grimy figure watched him from the gloom within. Once or twice a similar figure

emerged, eyed him suspiciously and enquired, not too civilly, what he wanted, and finding he was not a buyer turned away with a grunt of disdain.

Chilled and dispirited, he would have mounted his pony and made for Mauchline as if fleeing from the city of destruction. But even that was impossible; for the pony was promised to another rider who was going down into Ayrshire and undertook to deliver it safely to its owner. Secretly crestfallen over his own cowardice he returned to Baxter's Close.

Fortunately Richmond was a cheery, peptic, egotistical soul, whose lively chatter flowed like a fountain. He talked of old scenes, old sports, old merry-makings, old loves; and chuckled and talked again. Burns endured him, partly for his own sake, partly for auld lang syne, partly because he was a convenient aid in time of need. He was now the pert, up-to-date city man, friendly and hospitable, but with just a hint of patronage for the rustic fresh from the plough-tail. The poems, which made such a stir among country folk with little culture and no standards of comparison, well! what were they? Homely exercises in the vernacular. Frankly and honestly no great shakes. Any one with time to spare, a turn for rhyme, a knowledge of country ways and a command of the doric, could produce such stuff by the ream—Mr. Richmond himself, for instance, were he not better employed. So much for the poet; as for the man, he was much in need of sprucing up. On the third day, looking over his guest, Mr. Richmond remarked, quite amiably, "Mossgiel, I must introduce you to my tailor. The fashions of Edinburgh and Mauchline differ somewhat."

Burns cast an amused glance down over his hodden grey.

"A favour I meant to ask," he returned, "I have been marking with envious eyes how the Edinburgh bucks array themselves."

"And thinking," grinned Richmond, "that the president of the Court of Equity must live up to his high station."

So in obedience to Fashion and the promptings of pride Burns got himself clothes fit for the aristocratic streets and possible drawing rooms of Edinburgh—a blue coat of the finest cloth and latest cut, buff waistcoat, high jockey boots and buckskin breeches, tighter than his skin, he declared; for he could easily sit down in his skin but never in his new breeches without fear of a catastrophe. To be in keeping his hair was once more tied behind, and spread strictly *a la mode* over his forehead. It was a transformation.

"My faith! Solomon in all his glory," cried Richmond on the first view. "I foresee havoc among tender and romantic hearts. In spite of silks and laces they are mighty susceptible up here and take fire like tinder. I never ran to such fine livery myself; but then I was never an Adonis formed for conquest."

"John dear," responded Burns sweetly, "I love you like a brother; therefore spare your sarcasm. In present circumstances it's a thing that ill agrees with my stomach."

Chancing to enter at the moment, Mrs. Carfrae gave a gasp of sheer amazement.

"Losh! preserve us, what hae we here?" she cried, with the familiarity of the old-time landlady, "Are my een deceivin' me, or is it true? A rig oot for a lord. Ye'll hae the lasses daft about ye, Maister Burns." Burns bowed gallantly.

"Would it might be handsome widows," he said, his black eyes wickedly alight.

"Hish, hish!" returned the lady quickly, forcing back a blush. "Oh, Maister Burns ye mauna be haverin' that gate. My time for that's long owre. I'm trysted abune. My man's waitin' for me." And she turned her eyes devoutly heavenward.

"May the translation be long delayed," was on Burns's lips, but instead he said, bowing again, "The divinest of all felicities, a reunion in Paradise. The glorious prospect must make the trials and tribulations of earth seem nothing, Mrs. Carfrae."

Mrs. Carfrae sighed deeply. "'Deed they're gey ill to thole whiles. What wi' this and that and yon and the other thing a body's never oot o' het water. I'm a fair mairtyr to other folks' wickedness, Maister Burns. Thae godless rowdy limmers upstairs, oh! dear, they're workin' for something. But I'm forgettin' my errand wi' their on-goins. It was about supper I lookit in. I was thinkin' maybe ye'd like sheep's head."

"Singed?" cried Burns gleefully. She smiled on him benevolently.

"Ay, singed. If I was to open the door ye could smell it. Sheep's head and chappit tatties wi' seasonin'." She beamed as a purveyor who knows the sure way to men's hearts.

"Fit for a king," quoth Burns eagerly. "My mouth waters, Mrs. Carfrae."

"If kings had sense," agreed Mrs. Carfrae. "They're no aye blessed in that way, poor things. Weel! I'll no keep ye waitin' long."

"Mossgiel," said Richmond impressively when the lady was gone in a state between simpering and sighing, "practise your lovmaking on my landlady and as sure's you're alive there'll be trouble."

Burns laughed. "Impregnable, you fool, that fortress is as safe against any storming party as your castle on the rock up by. And a buxom, well preserved widow of forty-five too. But who are the wanton abandoned creatures above who cause her so much anxiety?"

Richmond made a gesture of negation. "Don't ask me, I have burned my fingers once. It is enough." Burns raised his eyes quizzically.

"Why! what treason to the sex is this? Tuts, is one trifling misadventure to freeze up the springs of gallantry? There are other fields to plough.

"Lovely Thais sits beside thee,
Take the good the gods provide thee.

There's a moral in that for my old friend of the Court Equity. But do you really know nothing of those above who are so foolishly imperilling their souls by trying to snatch a little pleasure as they go?"

"Oh yes," replied Richmond. "I know they make a hell of a din with their pleasures whiles, that they ogle on the stairs, and in Mrs. Carfrae's opinion are ripe for perdition."

"Poor souls," sighed Burns sympathetically. "You interest me—profoundly."

"I wouldn't let my interest run away with me, if I were you," rejoined Richmond, with a touch of iciness. "This isn't Poosie Nancy's, you know."

Burns grimaced. "What memories of gay hours you stir. There's duller company, my friend, than randie bodies dancing blithely along the primrose path."

"Oh," said Richmond, not without the suggestion of a sniff; for he was putting Mauchline delights behind him. "If you want more stuff for 'Jolly Beggars' go right upstairs. Don't stand upon ceremony. Just walk in and you'll have a hug of welcome. Only—" He was interrupted by a sharp rat-tat of bare knuckles on the door. "Oh! postie—" he broke off, making haste to open.

"Mr. Burns," said the postman, handing in a letter with an immense red seal.

Burns tore it open, read and passed the sheet to his host without comment. The effect was electric.

"Oh, ho!" cried Richmond excitedly, and again, "Ho, ho! Dalrymple of Orangefield, no less. 'The pleasure of your company to breakfast tomorrow morning,' if you

please. The new toggery comes just in the nick of time. You'll go."

"He's a good friend," replied Burns quietly. "It would be rude to refuse."

"Rude," echoed Richmond. "It would be daft. A county man hail-fellow-well-met with all the bigwigs in the land. Mossgiel, it's higher yet my bonnet, I'm thinking. All you have to do now is to play your cards."

His tone had changed completely. Mossgiel was stepping up, nay leaping up. He might soar to any giddy height. Once among the élite anything might happen. Mr. Richmond understood the value of a nod from the great.

CHAPTER 3

THAT breakfast was Burns's first real taste of patronage and to his amazement he found it deliciously sweet. Dalrymple was gracious, tactful, delicately flattering without taint of insincerity or condescension. Moreover—and here was his best service—he promptly passed his protégé on to more powerful patrons, my Lord Eglinton, my Lord Glencairn, the Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt, and above all, to Jane, Duchess of Gordon. This last feat of diplomacy was undertaken by the Earl of Glencairn.

"I have discovered a novelty for you," he informed his friend, the Duchess. "No, not a new game or a new mode in fashion. A man, a wonderful, wonderful man."

She twinkled on him roguishly. "A man, a wonderful, wonderful man. The Lord make me truly thankful. For it's the bare truth, Jamie, that I am grievously disappointed in men. What's the wonder about your wonderful man. I'm all ears to hear."

"Know the worst. He is a ploughman and writes poetry."

She pursed her lips in a low whistle. "Hooly! A ploughman and writes poetry! On your honour, Jamie, do you think he is fit company for Her Grace the Duchess of Gordon? *Noblesse oblige*, James. Tell me, is his muse dragged; does he flavour his verses with that particular odour of Araby which originates in the midden and the stable?"

"Never a flavour that I can detect. But read his book for yourself. It isn't long, and you'll find it hugely diverting."

She broke into a merry peal of laughter.

"Oh! Jamie, Jamie, don't you know me better than

that? Me sit down in cold blood to read a book! I'd as soon think of—of eloping with you."

Glencairn bowed low, grinning, "Alas, and alack-a-day! Would I were five and twenty again."

"Pooh! You're not so old nor so ill looking. Many a braw lass would give her best petticoat to be owre the border and awa' with James, Earl of Glencairn. Women are whiles daft. Take myself, didn't I once ride down the High Street of Edinburgh in broad daylight on a pig, just for the fun of the thing? No, I'm wrong, it was for a wager. Somebody dared me to do it, and I just did. Poor beast, how it squealed and protested. And the people! You should have seen their staring eyes and open mouths. Jeannie Maxwell, the daft dochter of the douce, sedate Sir William Maxwell, astride a careering, snorting, squealing, filthy sow, hanging on for dear life to the brute's ears. They nearly gaped their heads off. It makes me laugh to think of it." She chuckled reminiscently.

"A brave adventure, bravely carried out," smiled Glencairn. "People still speak of it." She gurgled.

"Do they now? What it is to be famous. But we're forgetting your wonderful wonder of a man. What are his points, James?"

"Good judges call him a prodigy."

She pretended to sigh, "A prodigy! I have met some prodigies in my time, and they were all dull, deadly dull. At the College over by they're as thick as blackberries, and every unfortunate mother's son of them is like a blanket fresh wrung out of cold water. It makes me shiver."

"I pledge my chance of salvation mine is not dull," Glencairn assured her with emphasis.

"Your chance of salvation. Poor security, Jamie, poor security. But it reminds me. What do you think? Last Sunday nothing would do me, but I must go to kirk like other folk. Think of me, like other folk." She trilled delectably. "Dr. Blair, their grand panjandrum, was in the

pulpit, and do you know? he was so civil and sweet and soothing that I fell fast asleep. I had been dancing or something till four in the morning. They had to pinch me awake for the benediction. I'm told Blair sits in judgment on poetry as well as on the sins of his fellow creatures. Have he and his tribe given your man their blessing?"

"They will if you lead the way. A great deal more than kissing goes by favour in this world, as *you* very well know."

"James, James," she cried. "Bribery and corruption. You think that the smile of a Duchess is an open sesame to the critic's heart. It's a wicked world, as the deil said to the saint he was luring away; but I never felt I was born to set it right. So I'll tell you what I'll do, Jamie, I'll take your word for it that the poems are beautiful and that I should read them and rave over them, may be greet over them, only greetin's bad for the eyes of beauty. There, no snickering, you cynic. You bring your lion when you think he's tame enough not to upset decent civilized notions. Let me see, there's that rout on Thursday; do you think he'd be frightened?"

"So far as I know he's never been accused of timidity."

"Courage, quoth the priest, and you may climb the golden stairs yet. Let it be the rout then. May God grant I shall find him amusing."

"I verily believe you'd sell your soul for diversion."

She shook an arch forefinger at him.

"No flattery, sir. You know that by common consent I have no soul. Gone long, long ago. Oh! I know very well what folk say about the baggage, Jean Gordon. My own face isn't more familiar to me, and many's the keek I have at it in the glass. But I ask you this, James, what were woman without vanity and what Heaven without gaiety?"

"Purgatory to you," was the prompt and laughing answer. "Well, as I said, I don't think you're likely to

find my man dull. By the way, did I mention that like the wisest man the world ever saw, he is a manifold and generous lover?"

"Oo, dangerous," she trilled. "That's exciting. Bring him without fail; but, James, Earl of Glencairn, if a scandal is the result, may the good Lord forgive you. I tremble." And she laughed merrily.

But to the amazement of Glencairn, his protégé flatly, if politely, refused to be on show at the rout. His Lordship expressed his surprise in some sage remarks, and passed on with a shrug and a gesture. Richmond was more voluble.

"Great Heavens, man," he cried, "do you know what you're doing? Have you taken leave of all the sense you ever had? Raining plums and you won't even take the trouble to open your mouth. The Duchess of Gordon! Why, man, she has only to smile on you, and your fortune's made. It's daft to refuse."

"Sheer lunacy," assented Burns. "But then, I never pretended to be worldly wise. I'm a fool on a new pattern all my own."

"You must be," agreed Richmond, who had spied a possible advantage to himself in this association with the great. Now the hope was destroyed by an insane obstinacy.

"It's like this, my friend," Burns explained humbly. "I have a foolish liking for standing on my own two feet. Those who are civil to me, who befriend me for what I am, shall always have my gratitude. Those who expect me to appear like a clown admitted on sufferance among a company of fashionable masks to be stared and tittered at, will just have to whistle for their fun. After all, I'm not an Egyptian crocodile or a two-headed monster to be paraded for the amusement of the minions of pleasure, not if I die unnoticed in a ditch."

When Glencairn reported, the Duchess raised her eye-

brows in genuine astonishment. She was not accustomed to cavalier refusals.

"Oh, ho!" she cried. "So his nabs, the ploughman, stands on his dignity. Is it native pride?"

"They say he's as proud as Lucifer."

"I have no notion how proud Lucifer was or what he had to be proud about. Still I don't condemn. There are worse things than pride of the right sort. Under my tom-foolery, I'm a bit proud myself. So we'll say quits on that score. I like a man who is independent; surely I do. So it comes to this then, that to gain our ends we must stoop and sue. Humility, they say, is good for the soul; so here goes. My Lord Glencairn, will you convey the compliments of the Duchess of Gordon and say she will be gratified if Mr. Burns will do her the honour of having a dish of tea with her at her town residence on such and such a date?"

Gurgling merrily, she looked up her crowded calendar of engagements and set a date.

So on the appointed afternoon, Burns, with Glencairn escorting, went to the great house in Hyndford's Close for his first meeting with a Duchess, who was also Queen and leader of Fashion. She was waiting for him alone in the grand drawing-room, and rose to greet him as if he were the best in the land.

"I am truly delighted to meet you, Mr. Burns," she said, giving her hand, in her best manner; and Jean, Duchess of Gordon, knew how to be gracious. He bent over her hand like the most practised gallant of France. She glanced quickly at Glencairn.

"A courtier, not a clod-hopping ploughman," her glance said. Straightening himself, Burns looked into her face; and with an odd, unaccustomed quiver of surprise, she thought that never before had she seen such eyes.

"Your Grace is not aware," he said, "but we have met before. Quite informally," he added with a smile.

"Oh! indeed. Pray when and where?"

"As I was riding up from Ayrshire on a poor, tired nag that couldn't get out of the way quick enough, your Grace's chariot wheels splashed us both with mud."

"A bad beginning," Glencairn growled inwardly. "A bad beginning. Maladroit, most maladroit."

To his relief, the Duchess showed no sign of displeasure.

"I apologize for the rudeness of my servants, Mr. Burns," she returned in her politest manner. "I would not splash a beggar, far less a poet."

"Your Grace is completely exonerated," said Burns, with another low bow; adding, "Flunkies are a hard race to control."

"Another *faux pas*," commented Glencairn mentally. "He'll be in the bog next step if he doesn't take care."

He watched the Duchess. For one brief moment a curious light glimmered in her blue-grey eyes; but they smiled. She was in fact taking lightning stock of her visitor. Quite clearly he was not afraid, nor in the least disposed to fawn on rank. That was something. They sat down, the Duchess smiling with a touch of the great lady, Glencairn watchful, Burns gingerly, lest the tightness of his breeches should suddenly give way. Otherwise he was as perfectly at ease as if he lived habitually in just such an atmosphere of elegance.

He had heard much of his hostess' beauty; but now his impression was that the half had not been told. She *was* beautiful, genuinely, undeniably beautiful. Yet the real charm, the real fascination, as he soon discovered, did not lie in perfection of form and feature. It lay in her bewitching vivacity, and especially in the dare-devil eyes which seemed to be a perpetual challenge to adventure. She was forty, and the mother of children, and looked twenty-five, only twenty-five could never have that ex-

quisite air of conquest which radiated from every expression of her face, every movement of her lithe, compact, supple body. He easily guessed that flattery was her daily fare, and supposed she took it as the prerogative of her rank, her talent and her beauty. One thing was clear—she was every whit as interesting as her reputation.

Tea was brought by a gorgeous creature in Gordon livery; and the trio talked, or rather the Duchess and the poet talked, the Earl merely throwing in a word here and there as chorus. The Duchess, he noticed, was at some pains to shine. In the beginning she dipped very daintily into persiflage; for the spirit of Voltaire and Hume still ruled Edinburgh society in its intellectual moments. But imperceptibly the lead slipped to her guest; and very soon she was leaning forward, elbows on knees, fascinated, enchanted by the most wonderful speech she had ever heard from human lips. He seemed the Admirable Crichton come to life again, with enlarged, more magical gifts. Humour, satire, pathos, flashing insight, good, grave, solid understanding—they were all there, with something over and above, which she supposed must be taken as the indefinable genius of Poet Burns. And his eyes added brilliancy to his words. Black as jet, piercing as lightning, how they flashed and glowed and softened and glowed again. If this man chose to make love, those eyes and that tongue might indeed work havoc.

Suddenly she rose and crossed the room. On a gilt Charles the Second table lay the *Kilmarnock Poems*, and beside them a copy of *The Lounger*, the chief literary periodical of Edinburgh.

"Last night," she said, turning back with both book and paper in her hand, "I broke all my vows and instead of doing homage to Mozart at St. Cecilia's Hall, I stayed by my lone self at home reading this," and she held up the book. "And I wasn't sorry, for it made the time fly. Only

they'll be saying, Mr. Burns, it's rather devilishly wicked in parts."

"Some of them have said so already, in a very loud voice," he returned.

"Ah! well," continued the Duchess, her eyes bright with delight. "It didn't come amiss to me. I enjoyed it. Like to like, you'll say, my Lord Glencairn. Have you read *The Lounger* on it? It expresses something of what I felt. Our dear Mr. Mackenzie, enthusiastic, as I think he never was before, over the Scottish Muse."

"I revere him," responded Burns, the note of gratitude in his voice. "Of course, your Grace has read 'The Man of Feeling,' an adorable book."

She gave a tinkling, half ironic laugh. "Indeed then, Mr. Burns, my Grace has done nothing of the sort. I found my dear friend, Lady Glencairn, with red eyes over it. 'You must read it,' she said, 'it would wring tears from a stone.' 'And make my eyes like yours?' I asked. 'Never while I have any regard for my own good looks left.' And I have kept my word. But Mr. Mackenzie keeps his big heart in the right place."

"I am much indebted to him and the other *literati* of Edinburgh—" Burns was beginning, but she cut him off with a laugh.

"T'other way about, Mr. Burns, if I'm any judge. They're much indebted to you. In all their lives they've never had anything like this," tapping the book. "And it's my humble opinion they'll never have the like again."

Rising, Burns bowed profoundly. Then he made to go, Glencairn also rising.

"Already?" asked the Duchess.

"We have been here nearly two hours," answered Burns.

"Two hours. It seems like two minutes. Well! You must come again, promise to come again—soon. There are some things I want to thresh out with you. My Lord

Glencairn, see that Mr. Burns comes again. No, I won't trust you. We'll set a date now." And they did.

Outside Glencairn remarked succinctly:

"*Veni, vidi, vici*. My dear sir, I congratulate you. Tomorrow all Edinburgh will be at your feet."

CHAPTER 4

GLENCAIRN merely prophesied what he knew. The news flew that the Duchess of Gordon had taken up with the most amazing enthusiasm a ploughman poet from Ayrshire; and, like a later disciple of the Muse, Burns awoke one morning to find himself famous. For like sheep crowding on the heels of the bell-wether, Society follows fervently where rank and fashion lead. The new lion might be this or that, a vulgar freak or a Heaven-sent miracle; but the example of the Duchess of Gordon was a thing to emulate ardently and with haste. So Mrs. Carfrae was plagued to distraction by powdered flunkies leaving daintily scented notes and cards of invitation for her bucolic lodger. The good woman could not understand it.

"Gude save us," she would exclaim. "Anither, anither. Michty me, it's like the locusts o' Egypt, fair smotherin'. The poor man 'll no' hae time to wash his face or say his prayers. Is a' Edinbury after him?"

All that counted in Edinburgh certainly were after him—Lady Glencairn, of course; Lady Betty Cunningham, the Earl's sister, and other exalted hostesses, with Lord Monboddo, the clever eccentric judge, and his cleverer daughter, the lovely Bessie Burnett. She of them all by her beauty, her wit, her love of poetry, and her sterling good sense captivated the unqualified admiration of Burns. She died young, and lives for ever, young and fair, as the heroine of an enraptured poet's song. But through all the hubbub of adulation, the Duchess jealously maintained her primary, prescriptive claim to the prize. He was often at the big house in Hyndford's Close, an honoured and familiar guest, with some of her Grace's chosen cronies invited to enjoy the wonders of his talk. It was remarked

that with each visit her enthusiasm and admiration grew. She even warned her friends how to behave towards him.

"No patronage for your life," she told them with a good-humoured laugh, in which there was real earnestness. "The slightest hint of it, and I believe his pride would blaze out in the most terrific revenge. Pen and tongue, oh! I tell you, he can be very, very terrible."

"Why," some one smiled, "you're actually proud of your ploughman."

"Proud of my ploughman. My dear, I like a *Man*. And tell me this, in all your born days, have you ever heard such speech from any other human being? He makes you clean forget all differences of rank and fortune, lifts you out of yourself, thrills you, whirls you, just as he likes. Here's a little secret for you. My ploughman, as you call him, is the only man who has ever swept Jane Gordon off her feet. When he speaks she cannot choose but listen."

"That's a tribute."

"A tribute! Hush! If I were not Jane Gordon, a respectable married woman, anything might happen. Those eyes and that tongue, what mischief might they not do!"

In truth wherever those fascinating, haunting eyes rested, even for a moment, there were quick responsive tremors under silks and ruffles. And while the fair and fashionable, tied up in elegant laces, fluttered and thrilled over the man the *literati* vied in acclaiming the poet. The Addisonian Hugh Blair and the courtly Robertson, imitator of the polished Hume, and incidentally Principal of the University, forgot for a little their attic loves, and burst out lyrically over the charms, the high Aristophanic genius of the Doric Muse. Dr. Blacklock, Henry Mackenzie, Dugald Stewart (an Ayrshire patron), with a train of erudite professors, uninspired for most part, but ever ready to follow their betters, swelled the chorus of applause. They talked, they wrote, they fêted the rustic marvel who upset all their theories of gifts and erudition.

One meeting in Argyle Square, at the house of Professor Adam Ferguson, an ardent Tayside Highlander, stands especially blazoned on the scroll of fame, because a second young genius happened to be present. The company was large and intellectually choice. Burns, ever wary in the society of scholars and reputed sages, held aloof for a little, pretending to examine the pictures on the walls. One print, depicting a dead soldier lying in the snow beside his grief-stricken wife and dog, arrested his attention. Below was a poetic inscription which he read aloud with curious emotion, and asked the author's name. Not one of the savants could tell. Burns seemed disappointed, whereupon from a corner at the rear, a boy answered bashfully, "Langhorne." Burns turned with a quick look of thanks and recognition.

"You'll be a man yet, my lad," he said, with a humorous smile. The prophecy was fulfilled, for the boy was Walter Scott. Forty years later the great Sir Walter recalled that moment and that look:

"I have never seen such another eye in a human head; and I have seen the most distinguished men of my time. It glowed (I say literally glowed) when he spoke with feeling or interest." The testimony explains the sudden commotion in many a gentle, romantic bosom.

So the tide of adulation and curiosity ran. The very urchins in the streets caught the fever and shouted one to another: "See, see, that's him, that's Robert Burns, ay, the big man wi' the pigtail." Never before within the realm of Scotland had poet such a triumph, such a feast of flattery. And to cap the popular appreciation, Mr. William Creech, Edinburgh's foremost bookseller, gallantly volunteered, on the persuasion of Mr. Mackenzie, to issue forthwith a new edition of the Poems, "with additional pieces." Better yet, the nobility and gentry, still led by the Duchess and Glencairn, hastened to subscribe, some in their zeal paying handsomely in advance—ten

guineas from my Lord Eglinton, ten more from Patrick Miller of Dalswinton, with further sums and promises from the Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt, and other rich and eager patrons.

Burns felt as if he must be living in some wild satiric dream. Full pockets; resounding applause; gold and glory for him who but yesterday was poor, obscure, and persecuted. Was fortune relenting in remorse that she was thus showering her favours? Did the dazzling blaze, the shouting and the banqueting turn his head? Hear himself at that very moment:

"I have now neither house nor home I can call my own," he wrote to his old friend, Robert Muir, very much more in earnest than in jest. "I am just a poor wayfaring Pilgrim on the road to Parnassus." And to another old friend, Robert Aiken, of Ayr, altogether in earnest:

"I look down on the future as I would into the bottomless pit."

And yet again to Mrs. Dunlop, a new friend and patroness:

"You will bear me witness that when my bubble of fame was at the highest, I stood unintoxicated, with the inebriating cup in my hand, looking forward with rueful resolve to the hastening time when the blow of calamity should dash it to the ground with all the eagerness of vengeful triumph." Little sign of inflated vanity there. As the best of his critics and eulogists has remarked: "In his unexampled situation, the young peasant is not a moment perplexed; so many strange lights do not confuse him, do not lead astray."

No, the young peasant was not confused, nor intoxicated, nor misled. Looking deep into the whole matter, as with eyes of divination, he said to himself:

"My son, beware, there are snares in your path. The notice of the great; the smiles of Duchesses, Countesses and other high dames and damsels; the handclasp of

nobles; the half staggered approbation of the learned, what in reality are they? Another ironic turn as Destiny spins the wheel.

With a mental shake of bravado, he put such thoughts from him. If the future was dark, all the greater reason for making the present bright. And enticements and opportunities abounded—festive Masonic meetings (he was already bard by acclamation of Kilwinning Lodge), riotous entertainments with the Crochallan Fencibles (humorously so-called); and as though his heart must ever have a reigning queen, stolen half hours with Jenny Clow, one of the bewitching “daughters of Belial” upstairs in Baxter’s Close.

His merriest hours were spent with the Crochallans, a club of ardent wits and hard drinkers that held revel and wassail in Daniel Douglas’s tavern in Anchor Close. There the rustic Burns learned many things concerning the great art of pleasure, among them this surprising fact, that hitherto he had been a mere novice and amateur in drinking. Seasoned toppers made sport of his halting, tentative efforts as a consumer of barley bree.

Further he learned that the wit which set the table in a roar in Tarbolton and Mauchline had to be sharpened and pointed for the blasé roysterers of Edinburgh. Inspired by wine, he rose brilliantly to the occasion, so that it was acknowledged that in repartee, in every device of wit and humour, the ploughman from Ayrshire was a match, often more than a match, for the best of them. Moreover, for their entertainment and his own, he made that collection known to the curious as “The Merry Muses,” an experiment in sculduddry which he wisely kept under lock and key.

But another attraction, entirely unsuspected, drew him to the tavern in Anchor Close. It happened that Daniel Douglas, an ardent, patriotic Highlander, sometimes enhanced the fun with a Gaelic song, sung as from the

heart. Burns would listen, his fancy taking wing far from Anchor Close. Ah! if *she* could only hear. One night after a rousing battle lay, Daniel suddenly broke into a low plaintive cradle song, a popular favourite with Highland mothers. Burns sat up, his face all at once quivering. A moment he remained rigid, his eyes fixed on the singer. It was noticed that he went white to the lips. Harry Erskine, Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, sitting opposite, stared a moment as in surprise and alarm; then leaning across the table he whispered anxiously:

"Are you ill, Burns?"

Burns shook his head. Next minute he rose abruptly, and hurried, without explanation, from the room, tears streaming down his face.

Mary had crooned that song to her little charges in Mauchline.

CHAPTER 5

OF A sudden Burns made a vital discovery. If he were to keep his soul alive, preserve his manhood intact, he must get away for a time from "the noise and nonsense" of Edinburgh.

The position was dizzying. Fêted and flattered, petted and lionized, he had scarcely one serene or sane moment to himself. Wherever he went, the fumes of incense were like an intoxicant in his nostrils. Rank, fashion, learning, all that was great and noble and beautiful, united in a chorus which swelled and swelled till its reverberations were heard throughout the length and breadth of the land. Sweet, entrancing, but perilously unwholesome.

On the practical side, luckily, the liberality of subscribers to the new edition of his Poems, filled his pockets with gold. The critics, too, even the cock-nosed law-givers of London, were friendly, at times enthusiastic, if also, at times, a little patronizing. Glory, adulation, excitement, romance, all that is connoted by the word *éclat*, he had *in excelsis*. It was like a gorgeous but fantastic dream, suddenly made true as at the waving of a fairy wand. Could vanity, could ambition ask more?

But, questioned the still small voice within, whither was the glittering tide bearing him? Sooner or later it must ebb. Novelty would cease to be novel; curiosity must wane, and what then? Yes, for the sake of present sanity and future health, he must get off for a turn in the fresh cool air of the country.

So he went out and bought an ancient, angular, raw-boned mare, "as hard as a kirk," fit mate for Rosinante, which he jocularly named Jenny Geddes, in memory of the termagant who changed the course of history with a stool in the High Kirk of St. Giles. Robert Ainslie, a blithe

youngster of his acquaintance, just then a writer's apprentice, also procured a nag, and together they set out gaily to tour the romantic Border Land. It was May, and in May even the cold grey bleakness of Scotland becomes suffused with a soft alluring green. They were in high feather as they rode by classic ways under a bright sky into the realm of myth and legend.

Burns found that his fame had preceded him. At Jedburgh the magistrates waited on the new poetic star in his inn, warmly congratulated him on his gifts and achievements; and would he do them the honour of accepting the freedom of their ancient and distinguished burgh? He honoured them, with a mental grin, and joyously toasted both town and magistrates in a bumper of Scotland's best. More to the taste of the adventurous amorist was a fervent passage with the pretty vivacious Isabella Lindsay, a local belle of note.

"Nota bene," he remarked in his private journal. "The poet within a point and a half of being damnably in love. I am afraid my bosom is nearly as much tinder as ever." Alas! "The love-kindling eye must beam on another; not on me. That graceful form must bless other arms; not mine."

So he breathes a prayer for "Sweet Isabella Lindsay," and passes on by haunted Melrose, Ettrick, and Dryburgh Abbey, with thoughts that insistently lingered behind. At Selkirk, the pride of bardship (if there were pride) got its first fall. The weather being Scotch and fickle, changed suddenly from sunshine to sluicing, drenching rain. On Saturday evening, May 12, soaked and dead weary, the travellers rode up to the Veitch Inn, looking the picture of dolour. Three men, one of them the village leech, sitting over their liquor in the cosy warmth within, watched the "drookit" strangers dismount, observing that the elder of the two looked like a common "drover chap." Presently a polite message reached the trio through mine host,

asking if the wayfarers might have the felicity of joining them in a sociable glass? With the insolence of the petty parochial snob (the most contemptible of a contemptible race), the medico sent a surly negative. They were genteel folk in Selkirk; what had they to do with draggled, uncouth drovers? Later he discovered, with a spasm of shame, which even snobbery could not ward off, that the "drover" of his boorish insolence was Scotland's poet. But Burns was gone, shaking the Selkirk mud off his feet, it may be supposed, in flaming scorn and disgust.

On Monday, May 14, a date for ever sacred to one of them, the pair were at Innerleithen, a spa situated just where the babbling Leithen joins the glamorous Tweed. The ancient Castle of Traquair, with its ghost-haunted memories, was the ostensible objective. But Burns had small thought of Traquair or its legendary associations. The fourteenth of May! Already a year had passed, a year of wonders, of excitements, of whirling sensations which might well dim or blot out tender memories. Yet,

Time but the impression deeper made,
As streams their channel deeper wear.

In the evening he stole off by himself, fearful lest any one should see and offer to bear him company. The long gloaming came insensibly, investing hill and valley and river with a mystic spell. To a seeker of romance the spirits of the heroic past might seem to be revisiting their ancient haunts, whispering eerily of doughty deeds and rare love-adventures in the brave days of old. But Burns felt none of these things. Quite a different spell was upon him. The sound of running water was in his ears, but it was not the sound of the Tweed. He heard a voice, low, sweet, passionate, ever dear; but it had nothing of the accent of Tweeddale. Ah! and he looked into blue, appealing eyes that melted in love and trust; and arms were about his neck, girlish arms, soft as down, tender as an

angel's kiss. Then, weird and startling, another note smote upon his inner ear, making his blood run cold. "Oh! Robin, if you forgot." He gulped, almost choking; his head bowed, his whole frame shook in a gust of agony.

Looking up, presently he turned his face westward. Yonder, somewhere yonder, under the darkening sky, his lost darling rested, serene and still waiting for him. Even in death Mary was true, because God made it impossible for her to be anything else.

A long time he gazed motionless and wet eyed into the deepening night. A great yearning filled his heart, and out of the yearning came a great resolution. Presently, in a little while, when the fret and fever of his life should have abated, he would make a pilgrimage to the west. They had trysted to meet at Greenock. He would keep that sacred tryst, so help him God.

CHAPTER 6

ASSUREDLY Burns knew Burns to the most secret instinct, the last chord and vibration of his nature. He might plan and resolve, tell himself with fixed decision, "Not again, no, not again," but in spite of him that bosom of tinder would blaze up at the tiniest spark of sentiment. It was *vive l'amour* and ever *vive l'amour*, as though Fate had doomed him to be the helpless slave of passion. Scarcely was the lovely Isabella Lindsay out of sight, when he was in the throes of new transports over the bright-eyed sister of Robert Ainslie, at her home in Berrywell, Berwickshire. But again he found himself toying with forbidden fruit.

"Heavenly Powers," he prayed in the privacy of his diary, "who knows the weakness of human hearts, support mine. What happiness must I see only to remind me that I must not enjoy it."

There was, however, comic relief. Of a sudden the wooer became the wooed. The lady in the case being in Scots phrase, "Guid enough but no' brent new," spied her opportunity, took counsel with herself, and resolved to annex him, willy-nilly, as her avowed and open lover. He was to ride to Dunbar; she would ride with him. Even his abounding, ever-ready gallantry revolted. He made polite excuses, hinted polite objections. They were dismissed with a sultry smile. So in all the glory of cream-coloured riding dress, hat and feather, she mounted a dun old cart horse "as huge and lean as a house," fitted out with a broken side-saddle, minus crupper or stirrups, and fastened with a frayed pillion girth. Burns surveyed the grotesque spectacle in shame and vexation. Then pretending to be in a fury of haste, he struck spurs into Jenny Geddes and rode "like the devil." She followed des-

perately, the old cart horse almost shaking her to pieces. After a mile or two of the chase, however, tossed, winded, and angry, she let him go, and he rode on triumphant and alone, the only time he ever fled from the face of woman.

Two or three days later he was down with a sharp attack of fever, a sequel, perhaps, to so many heart-rending ardours, aggravated by the soaking at Selkirk. Thereupon he became most piously penitent.

"Embittering remorse scares my fancy at the gloomy forebodings of death," he noted with his usual candour in his diary. "I am determined to live for the future in such a manner as not to be scared at the approach of death."

A whole night he tossed in pain and penitence. Next day the fever went as quickly as it came, and his pious resolution went the way of so many pious resolutions.

When the devil was sick, the devil a saint would be;
When the devil was well, the devil a saint was he.

He was bound for Mauchline; but before returning, he must see more of men and manners as possible grist for the poetic mill. So he crossed the Tweed into England, turned swiftly towards the Tyne, past romantic Alnwick and Morpeth to Newcastle, and thence across country to Carlisle. It was hard riding, for his time was short and Jenny Geddes not the easiest of steeds. But there were diversions to maintain his spirits. At Carlisle an enterprising damsel, taken by "some overtures of gallantry" on his part (he could not help being the gallant in action), and thinking him "a little cut with the bottle" proposed to clinch the business by a visit to Gretna Green. He smiled, a trifle sardonically, it may be, gave her a caress and a glass of cider, and said in effect, "Very interesting, my charmer, but I am neither so drunk nor so daft as you might suppose. Adieu, sweet siren, adieu. Better luck with your next."

"Go along," retorted the siren, suddenly showing her

teeth. "Get back to the scabby, barefooted lasses of your own country. They'll suit you better. Bah, you're Scotch! I should have minded that all Scotchmen are mean." And she turned on her heel in blazing contempt. It was a smack in the face which made the adventurous gallant wince.

At Dumfries next day, he had an ovation, however, which blotted out all memory of insults. As one man the population hailed the new star with shouts of joy and admiration. Of the star's achievements they knew nothing save by hearsay. It was enough that Edinburgh had set its seal upon his greatness and that consequently his fame rang from end to end of the land. His mere presence, they declared eloquently, was an honour to their ancient and loyal town, a town, they were proud to say, ever ready to recognize poetic genius. In proof they presented him with the freedom of the burgh, an unconscious stroke of irony in view of things to come. He was charmed with the Dumfries people and their joyous welcome. They were more or less his "ain folk," and honour from one's ain folk is of all worldly felicities the dearest.

But even now there was a fly in the ointment, though he did not let it worry him or mar his pleasure. The new honour was not a day old when there reached him a heart-broken letter (written by proxy) from a forgotten fair one in Edinburgh.

"Please call for the wench," he instructed young Ainslie, just then in the tangles of a delicate little intrigue of his own. "Give her ten or twelve shillings and advise her to some country friends."

Poor May Cameron! She was young and pretty, and most ardently loving; but he had other pressing, distracting business on hand. May was best at peace with friends in the country—pending what might betide.

Late one June evening he rode into Mauchline, his heart beating a triple tattoo on his ribs. Since he rode out

of it six months before, wonders had come to pass. He left it furtively, as one fleeing from disgrace! He returned with the éclat of a resounding celebrity. He thought of Daddy Auld, of Holy Willie, of James Armour and his virago of a wife, of Jean, of the parish constable. What would they say now, how would they behave? Would it still be the look of malice or would they duck like the sycophants they were in their hearts? He knew how *he* would behave.

He put up at the Whitefoord Arms for the night, and his reception was that of a grandee. He smiled, a trifle disdainfully. So the noise of his fame had actually reached Mauchline. It was "Mossgiel this" and "Mossgiel that," and "Man yer lookin' fine," and "What's the news in the big world?"

"Great news," he answered blithely. "Queen Ann's dead and the Dutch have taken Holland."

Perceiving there must be a joke somewhere in the statement, Johnny Doo laughed appropriately. Mossgiel was the same old card.

His first visit was to Gavin Hamilton, whose welcome was precisely what he expected.

"Now, haven't I cause to think well of myself as a prophet," cried Gavin, bubbling over with genuine delight. "Bear me witness, I foretold it all. Edinburgh at your feet, the whole country ringing with your fame, twice over a freeman of noted burghs, that's the ticket for swelled head. Sit you down and tell me everything."

And over a cup of morning claret, Burns kept him a full hour alternately eager and chuckling. Edinburgh scenes, characters, and incidents were hit off as in a comedy of Aristophanes, with touches peculiar to the author of "The Jolly Beggars" and "Holy Willie's Prayer."

"You should have seen the *literati* patronize and the sons and daughters of fashion condescend upon a poor poet," he said, his black eyes twinkling. "It would all

have been the wine of Circe, but for an obstinate native stock of independence and pride. They had never before seen a son of the soil stand on his own two feet in gilded drawing-rooms and seemed to be amazed that he could do it. Some of them were almost moved to admiration."

"Including the Duchess of Gordon," said Gavin. "That was a conquest."

"Her Grace was very gracious," Burns grinned. "It is part of her great game of pleasure to play the patroness. I was rather an unusual object. The rarest sight of all was to see her Grace dancing. Energy! She lickit at it like any country lass sweating in a reel; and when the rout was over, off she would go with a jest and a laugh, to sup with other roysterers at some handy, not very reputable howff. Some of her associates ate and drank till they had to decant in the old Roman style. I'll say for her, she was always more for fun than feasting. There's sense, and plenty of it, at the back of Jane's frivolity."

"All a bit heady," smiled Gavin.

"To the best of my knowledge and belief," returned Burns, "I have come back quite sober. As you know, I have never had a very exalted opinion of human nature. What I saw of it in the haunts of costly pleasure, has not sent my opinion up. To me it was all a raree show, just a raree show. Already very likely they are beginning to forget me. A nine days' wonder, my friend, is soon over."

"Needed a strong head," said Gavin with emphasis.

"As to that," responded Burns, with a pathetic little smile, "if I know myself, my besetting weakness is more of the heart than the head. In proof whereof I must now be off to see my baby daughter. She is mine in spite of them."

He called at the house in the Cowgate, all his pride erect and alert, and was received by Mrs. Armour, he could scarcely believe it, as one dear to heart and soul. The effect was to put him more than ever on his guard. Not so long

before she had let her tinkler-tongue loose in scurrilous abuse and, having exhausted her venom, banged the door in his face. Now she fawned, as if he were the best in the land. What marvels were wrought by a slight change of fortune, and how shamelessly some people took to sycophancy.

With proud, curt reserve he asked to see his little daughter, kissed her fondly, and walked out, sickened by this new servility. He did not so much as ask for Jean. She, poor girl, was in the house, dying to see him, to speak to him, yet not daring to face him. But, watching, she saw him leave with his head in the air, and fell back panting and fainting against the wall.

An hour later he was at Mossgiel, walking in unheralded, unseen. His mother coming out of the kitchen met him and halted with a gasp as of fright. Then with a cry of—"Oh! Robin!" she opened her arms, ignoring or defying all tradition of Scotch reticence.

CHAPTER 7

BURNS found it hard to adjust himself offhand to the changed situation, to realize that he, so lately the despised, persecuted, toil-worn rustic, was the man who had leaped at a bound to this amazing blaze of popularity, a popularity which resounded through all ranks and conditions from cot to castle. On the practical side, too, the result was exhilarating. For the first time in his life he had spare cash in his pocket, an almost incredible felicity. Sometimes he fingered the golden guineas as though to assure himself of their reality. Then he would thrill at the thought that at last he could indulge his native impulse of generosity.

Hitherto he had given nothing, having nothing to give. Now to a modest extent he was a capitalist, able to make gifts as his heart dictated. Almost his first act was to deck out his mother and sisters in new dresses; to Gilbert, now the real tenant of Mossgiel, he frankly opened his purse. Money had come unexpectedly; it was as much theirs as his, and he found an exquisite joy in sharing it. He seemed to invest Mossgiel with the glamour of a fairy opulence, the radiance of filial and brotherly affection.

For the rest he went about among his friends in the old free, unaffected way; his enemies he met with a high look, and a stiff chin. In the street he saluted Daddy Auld with a frigid politeness which said, "Yes, yes, I forbear to be rude; nevertheless, my good sir, times are changed." Elder Fisher and his unctuous crew, he treated with a mocking smile, which was as poison rankling in the marrow. Some said that his new honours—and what were they at bottom?—made him insolently, unbearably up-pish; others that it was only the natural arrogance of the man coming out. Had it not always been his game to

thrust himself forward with impudent airs and pose as first fiddle in every company? Hearing such things, Gavin Hamilton broke into a fiery defence.

"No," he told critics and cavillers, "Mossgiel's head is not turned. He is not drunk with vanity or conceit or arrogance, or anything else of the kind. I can testify to that. He is as sober as the most humdrum or stupid of us. But don't imagine that the lion of Edinburgh society—and I invite you to find out what that means—can turn in a moment to the slushy, sloshy drudgery of a farm as if nothing in the world had happened. Could we, could any one of us in his place? Give him time to recover breath."

Some, however, conveniently forgot old enmities, such is the magic of success. James Armour, revolving this and that, took occasion to waylay him with obsequious smiles and most flattering congratulations. They all rejoiced in his wonderful rise to fortune, Mr. Armour assured him. Long might it continue and go still higher. They often talked of him (which was true); and would he not call again, letting old unhappy things drop into the void of oblivion? They would all be so delighted to see him.

He called again and saw Jean for ten cruel minutes. She came into his presence white as death, dumb, trembling, knowing neither what to say nor what to do. Only her black eyes, turned for one burning instant on his, told what her tongue could not. But père and mère made up for her confusion and silence. Never was such fawning, such flattery, such obsequious desire to blot out unpleasant memories. He listened and looked in cold disgust and contempt. Then, as though unable to endure any more butter and honey, he turned abruptly to Jean.

"Madam," he said in a tone that was as a galvanic shock, "will you have the goodness to bring our child? I much wish to see her." The girl was in Mauchline; the boy was at Mossgiel.

Poor Jean was paralyzed; but her mother promptly ran off with a "Yes, yes, ay, to be sure, it's naitural, very naitural."

Next minute she was back, ceremoniously carrying the sleeping baby.

"There, there my doo," she cooed. "Balloo, balloo. Noo is she no' just the bonnie wee wean? And the very image o' her daddy. Take her, Mossgiel."

She put the child into his arms. Instinctively he stooped, kissing the fluffy little bundle full on her tiny little rosebud of a mouth, letting his lips linger fondly. With a quick look of intelligence at her husband, Mrs. Armour moved away, he discreetly following and shutting the door softly behind them; and Burns and Jean were alone. Outside Mrs. Armour touched her husband's arm and they paused to listen. Within the dead silence seemed to last an eternity. Then suddenly there came the sound of a baby voice, followed by an inarticulate murmur from Jean. Again the baby voice sounded, this time as in crowing glee.

"She's wakened up laughing," Mrs. Armour whispered excitedly. "Thank the Lord for a' His mercies. Come, they'll make it up. They canna help themselves," she added with a woman's unerring intuition.

She was right. Next day, Benny Elliott, the parish newsman, had a great tale to tell. Mossgiel and Jean had made it up, and were, if possible, thicker than ever; with his own eyes he had seen them in the gloaming and never were two lovers more 'fidgin' fain'.

"And a'body kens," said Benny with a knowing wink, "that cauld kail het again's the hettest kail o' a'." He was able to add an authentic information that "James and Mary Armour were making a mighty ado owre Mossgiel, noo that he's a big man he's a grand catch."

"Ay," said the good folk of Mauchline, deeply inter-

ested, though a little disappointed. "Weel, weel! we'll see — what we'll see."

Meanwhile Burns was the hero of the occasion in any company in which he chose to appear. It was remarked that the dandies of Edinburgh had certainly polished him up, given his wit an edge and his manners a smack of the drawing-room. *Per contra* it was remarked that Edinburgh had not affected his rousing Homeric laugh, his zest in tossing off a glass or his penchant for biting local satire. But one thing observers did not see or understand, that his jollity was a mere surface display. Deep down in the dark abyss within seethed a world of troubled emotion, of gloom, of feverish doubt and yet more feverish longing, which neither the brilliant success of the poet nor the dramatic reconciliation with Jean could allay or satisfy.

One thought, one image in particular haunted him like a ghost, often breaking in on his wildest bursts of revelry. Mary!

Suddenly, one evening at Mossgiel, he announced his decision to go off for another little jaunt of a few days, this time to the west country. Of his motive for going he gave no hint. So once more he mounted his trusty mare, Jenny Geddes, and set his face westward by the route *she* had gone. It was June, the queen of months, with her thousand enchantments of colour and fragrance, her airs of Arcady, her blue skies and golden horizons. Normally he would have felt the exhilaration of sun and breeze, like a cordial in his blood. But for the present, he was too closely wrapped in other thoughts to be sensible of the glory of earth and sky. His heart beat tensely to one tune. "Here and here," he told himself a hundred times, "her eyes lighted as she passed; here and here she stepped down. Her feet touched these stones." And he felt a kind of pained astonishment that the stones showed no appreciation, gave no sign of that magic touch.

One thing was certain, that as she sped on, increasing

the distance between them, she was thinking of him. Now, a pilgrim of bereaved love, he followed, thinking wholly of her. From the bosom of God, where her pure soul reposed, did she look down in love and pity on her mourning, adoring lover? He almost fancied he heard, as in a mystic whisper, the dear sweet voice breathing her "Oh! Robin!"

His first objective was Campbeltown; but chance took him to Inverary; and there he had the Selkirk reception over again—with aggravations. It happened that there was a ducal house-party in the castle close by, and the guests overflowed into the village inn. There was no spot for a casual visitor, nor any desire whatever to be polite or accommodating. Who was he anyway to come at such a time, bothering a fussing, worried, sweating innkeeper, whose very salvation depended on pleasing the Castle? Let him begone; there was nothing for him. And he went, leaving this memorial:

Whoe'er he be that sojourns here,
I pity much his case,
Unless he come to wait upon
The Lord their God "His Grace."
There's naething here but Highland pride,
And Highland scab and hunger:
If Providence has sent me here,
'Twas surely in an anger.

Turning eastward, he rode "through a country where savage streams tumble over savage mountains thinly over-spread with savage flocks which starvingly support as savage inhabitants." His own mood was no less savage. On that account he decided to avoid Campbeltown. Probably it, too, was savage and might repeat the insults of Inverary. That would not be at all in harmony with the spirit of Mary. Yet the gentlest, the tenderest of her sex came from these barbarous scenes. How unlike them she was, and

how little, he reflected, did nature and human nature harmonize at times.

On Loch Lomond side he discovered with joyous surprise what true Highland hospitality meant—a heart-rousing welcome and a night's festivity, with singing and dancing as animating, almost, as Tam o' Shanter witnessed in old Alloway Kirk.

But ever his real thoughts pressed forward as though he actually saw *her* beckoning. So he pushed on with a rising temperature to Greenock. Their trysting place and she not there to meet him. Yet she was there, she was everywhere, an omnipresent influence, in the crooked, dingy streets, among the people, in the very air he breathed. By dint of hard searching he found the small house in the mean street where she died. He had to calm himself before he could knock, and when he did his hand shook. There was no response. A second time he knocked, his heart beating against his ribs as if it would break loose. All at once the door opened and a stout, middle-aged woman stood regarding him with questioning eyes. Of a sudden her expression changed from cold enquiry, to startled perplexity. Something puzzlingly familiar in those swarthy features and black eyes. Then in a flash she remembered. Mary's silhouette. "He has a dark face and black eyes," Mary had told her many times. "Oh! such eyes, Mother, you never saw the like."

"You are—Robert Burns of Mossgiel?" she said, almost choking with excitement. He bowed and did his best to smile.

"You are quick at the guessing. Yes, I am Robert Burns of Mossgiel, and you are Mary's mother."

"Ay," she returned on a heaving breast, "I am Mary's mother." Then on a tense, hard note, "What brings ye chappin' to my door?"

To that question he never knew precisely what or how he answered. In the course of a varied life, he had had

many crucial moments, but few more trying than this. Mary's mother confronting him in downright hostility.

"I was counting on a little talk with you, Mrs. Campbell," he managed to say presently. "May I come in? For the sake of her that's gone," he added like a suppliant.

"For the sake of her that's gone," she repeated in a tone which seemed to say very decisively, "The very reason for refusing you admittance."

He expected her to turn and shut the door in his face, but after another hard look and a moment's hesitation, she stepped back to make way for him.

"For a wee minute then," she said. "Just step in here." She opened the door to a tiny room off the passage. "I'll tell her father you are here. He's upstairs."

When she told who waited below, Archibald Campbell exploded like a charge of gunpowder.

"That man," he cried in a wild access of fury. "He comes to my house? Him! And he wants to shake hands with me? I'd sooner, look you, shake hands with the devil. I will not shake hands with him. I never want to see his face or hear a word from his mouth. Let him be off out of this—for—for fear what happens. Him coming here. As long as you live, never name his name to me again. It is killing him I could be," he ended with the hoarseness of ungovernable rage. "Yes, killing him!"

It was no idle talk. To the end of his life the name of Robert Burns never crossed his lips nor durst any member of his family mention it in his hearing. That very day he had found and burned every scrap, prose and verse, which Burns ever wrote to Mary—a priceless treasure. The Bible was spared—because it was the Bible, and because the names were obliterated.

Debating with herself how to act, Mary's mother returned to her visitor. Next minute there came the sound of crunching footsteps on the stairs. To her ear it quivered with rage, with ferocious undying hatred. Then the door

banged, as at the hurling of ten furies. Looking out, Burns caught a glimpse of a man striding off in furious haste. But he did not know that Mary's father could not abide even the thought of being under the same roof with him.

Perhaps it was womanly curiosity, perhaps some finer, tenderer feeling, that actuated her; but Mary's mother softened for a brief moment into talk. Burns had come for particulars of his loved one's illness and death, possibly for a last fond message. But, letting the flood of feeling run, her mother broke into praises of the gentleness and goodness of her lost girl; and Burns, bowing his head, knew that every word was true and short of the truth.

"A better lass was never born," she declared, choking on a sob. "And—and you forgot her in the end. She told me with her dying breath; and eh! but she loved you well, my Morag, my little Morag!"

With a lump in his throat, Burns murmured that the love was mutual, that he adored Mary; but she did not hear.

"Ay," she pursued, "she gave you a good girl's love, and that's the best thing for a man in all God's world; a good girl's love. You know if you deserved it. But I'll tell you this,—you'll never have the like of it again. The last thing she said to me—but oh! I can't speak of it, I can't speak of it." She stopped, wiping her eyes. After a dead pause she added, "She's in the West Kirkyard now."

For both of them the ordeal was too painful to be prolonged. Burns rose, moved towards the door, and then turned abruptly.

"May I beg one privilege?" he said, his lip quivering. "Let me kiss the hand of Mary's mother."

She made no objection; she scarcely understood the act of devotion; only as he bent she said brokenly:

"My hand! What is it? You have kissed her lips; and oh! but they were true, true."

Half blinded by tears, he stumbled forth into the street,

took a walk to compose himself, shunning people, then sought out the West Kirkyard and marked the spot where *she* lay, in the shade of the old yew tree. That done he went off to commune with himself. But late that night, young Robert, Mary's brother, whom she had nursed to her death, chanced to pass by his sister's sleeping place. It was windy and scudding wrack of cloud drove across the moon's face, making the light fitful and weird. Looking into the churchyard, as he always did in passing, he drew up with a cold shock at sight of a dim figure kneeling bareheaded by Mary's grave. Awed and fascinated, he stood to watch. A long, long time the bent figure remained motionless. Then it rose, looked down a while and turned away, but immediately wheeled back and threw itself prone on the grave. At last it rose again slowly, as if unable to tear itself away, climbed the low wall and without glancing at the boy, disappeared into the night.

Awe-stricken, excited and breathless, Robert ran home to tell his amazing tale.

"Oh! mother," he cried, "I saw a man at Mary's grave. First he was on his knees, then he was on his face, and when he came out as sure as death he was greetin'. Who do you think it could be?"

To his surprise his mother took the story quite calmly, merely remarking that folk "often went into the kirk-yard to greet," and he was not to be getting queer notions into his head about strangers.

But well she knew who had been prostrate on Mary's grave.

CHAPTER 8

WILLIAM CREECH, the Nabob of Edinburgh publishers, in the fulness of time the Right Honorable, Lord Provost, found it an intolerable hardship to part with money. In his rustic simplicity Burns expected prompt remittances of cash in hand; as they did not come he had the temerity to expostulate and finally press for payment. Thereupon, as patron and purse-holder, Mr. Creech felt obliged to dispose of a comic delusion, while gently hinting a polite rebuke. The "custom of the trade," blessed phrase! was this and that, and t'other, and he could assure Mr. Burns that the laws of the Medes and Persians were lax and flexible in comparison. There was such a thing as the folly of kicking against the pricks.

Genus irritabile vatum. (A scholar and a gentleman, Mr. Creech kept a handy stock of tags for reproof, admonition, or edification, as might be). He jocularly supposed poets could not help being an irritable race over their heavenly craft—Providence for its own inscrutable reason made them so—but they should not be impatient. Accounts, money! All in good time according to the rules of the game.

"Damn his impudence," was Burns's appreciative comment, "and doubly damn his sophistry and humbug."

The result was an instant determination to saddle Jenny Geddes (she was getting plenty of exercise) and ride forthwith to Edinburgh to spur the lagging Creech. Privately he had other reasons for going, equally appealing, if on the surface less cogent. He found it impossible to settle down. The fever of unrest was in his blood; the taste of pleasure in high places in his mouth. He had seen how the privileged of the land enjoyed themselves, had even been admitted to the full enjoyment of their revelries.

By contrast the old life with its slavish toil was too drab, too much like the dreadful monotony of the tread-mill to be resumed. Besides, what was there to settle down to? There was vague talk of a farm; yet vaguer talk of the Excise as a possible refuge; but Jamaica remained looming dismally as background to the picture. He needed excitement, diversion; Edinburgh offered it. To carry on a little of the cash to which Willie Creech was clinging so tenaciously, would be extremely convenient. And, come to think of it, why should a poet be diddled and put off with dose upon dose of bland insolence? O *Sancta Simplicitas*. As he was presently to find, he had much to learn and not a few cherished delusions to discard.

He called on Mr. Creech, and Mr. Creech, playing the genial Mæcnas, treated him to a cup of claret and a jocose homily on the absurdities of authors, especially of the rhyming tribe, in regard to their extravagant expectations of cash, hard cash, for their airy productions.

"My dear Burns," said Mr. Creech, with the impressiveness of a pontiff, helping himself to a swig of claret. "You simply cannot conceive what we have to put up with. First it's impossible to get people to buy books, and if we prevail on them, it's impossible to get them to pay. I assure you it's a devilish trade altogether."

Burns laughed, not too reverently. "Yet you contrive to sell and get cash. For instance, in the case of my poor book, people have both bought and paid."

Mr. Creech brought the tips of his fingers together, with a pitying smile.

"Yes, it is true that by much pushing we have managed to get rid of a fair number, a very fair number, indeed, considering the horrible state of the market."

Here was Johnny Wilson's plea over again in a subtler form.

"The general state of the market may be good or bad," Burns ventured. "But fortunately my subscription list

made a moderate success assured. The book was to be sold for ready cash only. It was your own admirable stipulation."

"True, true," agreed Mr. Creech blandly, taking another and larger helping of claret. "As you say, I made the stipulation myself, wholly and entirely, let me say, in the author's interest. But ah! me. 'The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley.' There's gospel for you. My word! it takes a poet to put things."

He rubbed his hands ecstatically. Burns bowed with an odd ironic expression.

"Yes," pursued Mr. Creech, as one who in his heart of hearts is distressed by the general depravity, "I made a rule; but can I keep it? Lord, Burns! the downright knavery of people. Among the idyllic scenes of Ayrshire, it is all an Eden-like innocence, but here—you simply can't be up to them. They come into my shop, folk I know and must not offend. By the way, did I tell you that I have my eye on the Town Council?" Of a sudden he grinned confidentially. "A man should always take care to have more than one string to his bow." Burns laughed.

"The mouse that trusts to one poor hole,
Can never be a mouse of any soul,—"

he quoted.

"God! that's good," cried Mr. Creech enthusiastically. "And sound philosophy. In this tricky, topsy-turvy world, we need all the wits we've got, mice and men alike. Well! as I was saying, in they come, and poke round and sniff, and smile and say, 'Bonnie, bonnie, unco bonnie, I'd like fine to hae't; but losh! I haenae the money on me the noo. If ye just trust me a wee while, Maister Creech, I'll send it along!' So they pocket the book, forget their promise—and there you are."

With a martyr-air he spread out two fat, white hands,

his expression asking, "What on earth is an honest man to do in face of such arrant knavery?"

"Then," he proceeded smoothly, "a considerable number of subscribers have sent their money direct to yourself. That complicates things. So you see, my dear Burns, how I am between the devil and the deep sea. But, of course," he made haste to add with the benignity of the born benefactor, "if you want something to be going on with—The first of our poets, yes, don't protest, modesty doesn't pay, I say it deliberately, the first of our poets, the glory and pride of his country, must not be left shivering on the rocks. But there, we forget. Let me fill your glass. Have no fear. I can guarantee the stuff."

"Umph!" thought Burns, on a groundswell of resentment. "Fobbed off with a glass of wine and a dose of fulsome flattery."

Praise without stint; pudding in doles—that obviously was Mr. Creech's beneficent plan, God bless his impudent, oily face. Pride revolted. Yet, however the blood might boil it would never do to quarrel with the man. So "nursing his wrath to keep it warm" Burns turned to whatever interest or pleasure Edinburgh had now to offer.

On the second morning after his arrival, a stranger accosted him in the street, without any show of deference.

"Mr. Robert Burns, I think," said the man in a brisk business-like tone.

"You think quite correctly," Burns answered, halting on his step. The man took an official-looking document from his pocket.

"A wee bit reminder," he observed, presenting it with a half-suppressed grin.

Burns glanced at it and smiled.

"A pretty *billet doux*," he remarked, quite affably. "These things happen, my friend. We must toast this little affair. I hope your duties do not prohibit a friendly dram."

They did not. "As agreeable a chiel as I ever met," the

man reported to some of his own fraternity. "I could hae been blin' fou if I liket, only a man maun keep sober for our business."

On his part Burns had almost forgotten the sweet episode to which this second writ in *meditatione fugae* was the sequel. The pretty, loving May Cameron! Well! he was no cad. The poor lass must not be left in the lurch. Therefore having ready money he settled that score off-hand, and felt virtuously free.

Idling, killing time to suit another man's convenience is ever weary work. Burns chafed and cursed; cursed and chafed, heaping maledictions on Creech. Moreover life in the old quarters was becoming irksome. Forgetting the Court of Equity frolics, and certain cognate matters, John Richmond was disposed to preach, and the godly Mrs. Carfrae, chiming in dolorously about the wicked hussies upstairs, gave the *coup-de-grâce* to patience. Seeing no earthly reason why he should be plagued by bores, Burns bade both of them adieu, and took up lodging with William Nicol, schoolmaster, the Willie of the most famous drinking song ever written. Quick-witted, sharp-tongued, independent, a proved *bon vivant*, a scoffer at pretence in all its protean forms, and most ardently appreciative of Coila's bard, he was in most respects a man after Burns's own heart. It was his long vacation.

"You have talked of a trip through the Highlands," he said one day, as the pair discussed plans. "Suppose we go together, paying share and share alike of the shot. By the time we come back, Shylock Creech may have found grace and be ready to disburse."

"Glorious," cried Burns, instantly aflame with enthusiasm. "It's been one of my cherished dreams. Through the Highlands on horseback—"

"Horseback," cut in Nicol. "And get sore bones and maybe broken necks. No, mon cher. Call me an epicurean, for it's the shameful truth that I love ease more than ad-

venture; so it'll be a chaise or nothing. We can loll in a chaise, we can drink in a chaise; if overcome, we can sleep in a chaise."

"A chaise be it then," assented Burns affably. "Jenny Geddes, poor rejected beast, shall be sent home wi' her finger in her mouth, as my mother used to say."

"Take my word she won't be sorry," said Nicol succinctly. "You're not the lightest of riders."

Burns had other reasons for leaving Edinburgh. The place was still full of fascination but he was conscious of a subtle change in the atmosphere. It seemed that Fame did not put the trumpet to her lips with quite the old rousing ardour. Was the gilt already off the gingerbread; were people beginning to forget?

A trifle glumly he mentioned his thoughts to Nicol.

"My dear Burns," was the response, "the man who goes and gets drunk on popular applause is one of two things—a vainglorious fool or a congenital idiot. For all your genius I've never taken you for either. The mountain wind will blow away morbid vanities. So let's be off to the land of crags and chasms and blasted heaths, and bare-shanked caterans, every mother's son of them a fit decoration for the gallows. God grant we don't get our throats cut."

"What's the odds, my philosopher?" laughed Burns. "Life is all a variorum, and there's but one possible end to the play. Out with your chaise."

As travelling companion, Nicol had many graces and one exasperating fault, a temper that was as tow at the touch of fire. On the very first day, he broke out over a trifling annoyance; then ashamed and penitent, he became almost cringingly genial. It happened that late on a moonless night, they passed the flaring furnaces of Carron iron works, near Stirling; Nicol, watching for a chance to be agreeable, cried out:

"Look, Burns, look! What a glorious sight." But for future safety, Burns meant to give a lesson.

"Sir," he retorted, "I would not look at your bidding, if it were the mouth of hell."

The thrust went home. Yet at Castle Gordon, to which the Duchess had retreated for a rest from pleasure, there was almost a breach. Calling to pay his respects to her Grace, Burns was received with a joy that made time fly unheeded.

"How fortunate," said the Duchess gleefully, "I am hourly expecting Harry Addington" (Tory M.P. and Prime Minister to be). "Pitt's white-headed boy, you know. You'll stay and meet him. He has patronage to bestow, fat sinecures all over this glorious land."

She reckoned without Mr. Nicol. Feeling himself neglected, and therefore affronted, he blazed out furiously. Left like an underling at the village inn, while my Lord Mossgiel hobnobbed with rank at the Castle. Was he expected to endure *that*?

"Out with the chaise," he ordered peremptorily. "And be damn quick about it."

Learning he was there, the Duchess sent an express messenger with an invitation, Burns, for sake of peace and possible explanations, accompanying. They found the chaise out and the fuming Nicol ready to start.

"Yes, I am going," he flung at Burns. "If you're coming, come; if not, stay. I have had enough of snobbery."

"Snobbery?" queried Burns.

"Yes, snobbery. Duchesses are fine, aren't they? Are you coming or staying?" He was in the chaise ready to give the word to go.

"Nicol," said Burns, with a fierce effort to curb his own temper. "This is simply childish. We can't go like that."

"I can," was the retort. "But I won't bandy words. Once more, are you coming?"

To obviate a scene, Burns elected to go, smothering, as far as possible, anger and disgust in presence of her Grace's messenger. But it needed a terrific effort to prevent an explosion.

"What a damn inkneed, obstinate, blazing sort of a fool you are," he growled, taking his seat.

"Thank you. That's meat and drink," quoth Nicol, fuming more and more. "Did you really think I was to bide your pleasure in that foul byre of an inn, while you did the grand with a Duchess?"

"Her Grace sent you an invitation," rejoined Burns. "Now I must write and apologize for your boorish, brutal behaviour."

"Her Grace," snorted Nicol. "Oh! yes, her Grace condescended to send me an invitation—a most beautiful and obliging after-thought, very gracious, oh! past words, gracious. But you'll remember what happened to the five foolish virgins."

At a sharp word of command from Burns, the chaise stopped.

"Nicol," he said, "it is nothing that you insult me. I know your damnable temper and insane vanity; but is it the part of a gentleman to insult a lady who cannot defend herself or explain where you are wrong? Now listen. You have laid down the law on one point; I will lay it down on another. Either you apologize to me here and now, or you go neck and crop out of this carriage. Take your choice."

His black eyes flashed with an expression such as Nicol in all his varied experience never saw before. Two of a party cannot both be masters; and that look declared beyond possibility of doubt, which was to be master now. Still Nicol, who had long practice in badgering and brow-beating schoolboys, was not to be cowed.

"You forget one small item," he retorted, "that this carriage is as much mine as yours."

"A little while ago you seemed to own it," said Burns, the wrath in his eyes increasing. "But we won't go back on that. I have given you your choice—and I mean to keep my word."

For a full minute there was dead silence; then the stronger will prevailed.

"I apologize," said Nicol.

"Unreservedly?"

"Unreservedly."

"That's better."

The chaise went on, and each lay back in his corner, nerves tingling, blood racing. Then suddenly as by a mutual impulse, anger dissolved in laughter. There is no solvent of ire like a wholesome sense of the ridiculous.

CHAPTER 9

THE little matter of mastership settled, the travellers returned to Edinburgh in perfect amity. Through the heart of the Highlands, across the Grampians, they had explored a new world, a world of unimagined delight—crag and chasms and wild heath as they expected, only bathed in a transfiguring glow of sunshine; purple and azure, such as they had never seen even in dreams; gleaming, rushing torrents; waterfalls scattering silver spray over rocks; bens crowned by snowy clouds; radiant days and nights of twilight magic; and, best of all, everywhere a people made for courtesy and hospitality.

Burns was enchanted. With a poet's and a patriot's eyes, he had looked on Perth, the "Fair City": by the lordly Tay, once the seat of kings; on Inverness, Aberdeen, Strathspey, Strathtay, "The birks of Aberfeldy," Dunkeld, Killiecrankie, Cawdor with its ghostly traditions of Macbeth and the murdered Duncan, a wonderland of inspiration, the very marrow of tragedy and romance. He stood on the fatal field of Culloden and saw, as in a vision, Charlie's men and the Stuart cause shattered to atoms by the brutal Cumberland; he stood on the glorious field of Bannockburn and beheld Bruce's army charging to victory, "Scots Wha Hae," chanting like the music of muffled thunder in his imagination.

Nor were softer moments lacking. Three short miles east of Loch Tay, at Croft Moraig, the Croft of Mary (did the name touch a tender chord?) there stood and stands a broken circle of upright stones, the poor memorial of a vanished race. At sight of it, Burns stopped the chaise, got out, and kneeling alone, "said his prayers" in that ruined temple of the past. Nicol, who was rarely troubled by reverence, would have made a flippant jest of the act,

but noting the expression on the worshipper's face, he wisely held his peace. Turning and looking back as they went their way, Burns remarked with a sigh:

"There's a lesson for vanity. The stones are there; but the men who set them up, doubtless with consuming zeal and immense toil, where are they? Gone down into utter oblivion, their very names lost to remembrance. For how brief a span in the aeons of time is the best of us remembered."

"You are wrong," said Nicol quietly. "All that is old is not forgotten. Homer is older than the Druids at whose desecrated shrine you have been worshipping, centuries and centuries older, and has long outlasted them. Some of us, Burns, are fairly sure of remembrance—you, because you are—what you are; and I because I am privileged to be your friend."

The response of Burns was a fervent handclasp.

He returned confidently expecting to refill a depleted purse. But Mr. Creech, still impeccably polite, still generous with his claret and his blarney, was better primed than ever with explanations and reasons for delay. Being a poet, oh! happy fate, Mr. Burns could not, of course, understand the tribulations of a poor publisher. It was easier, on Mr. Creech's honour and conscience, it was easier, to draw blood from a stone or take the breeks off the naked shanks of a Highlandman, than extract money from some people's pockets.

"Much easier," thought Burns, thinking of his own difficulties over the operation.

Still, being a born optimist, Mr. Creech kept bravely pushing and trying. Patience for a little while, patience, the divine virtue of saints, and then, Mr. Creech devoutly believed—the New Jerusalem for poets, which is to say, rivers of gold. Pactolus come to Edinburgh. Meantime, he ventured to submit it would be the worst policy in the world to imitate the importunate widow, who must really

have been a virago, a vixen, a nuisance, and a hindrance to business.

"I have always rather admired the lady," Burns observed. "Her methods may not have been the pink of politeness, but they were effective. She got what she wanted, by the only means in her power, poor body." Mr. Creech disposed of the pleasantry with a tolerant smile.

"Heaven help the poor devil who dances to the piping of the purseholder," thought Burns. "So are sycophants and lackeys bred."

Nevertheless he waited, doing his utmost to curb a rising, boiling impatience and resentment. For sake of diversion, he took another turn round friends within an easy radius of Edinburgh. But he was soon back, this time to a lodging with Nicol's colleague, William Cruickshank, at 2 St. James's Square, in the more fashionable New Town. An old pupil, Lord Brougham, paid tribute to Cruickshank, as "a worthy man." To Burns—

His fauts they a' in Latin lay,
In English none e'er kent them.

More interesting, assuredly more inspiring than the staid, elderly schoolmaster, with his antique ways and classical allusions, his rather tiresome references to defunct Greeks and Romans, was his young daughter, Jenny. It happened that Burns was deep in the study of old songs and airs for Johnson's Musical Museum. Jenny, though little more than a child, played old Scottish tunes divinely; and Burns, listening enraptured, drank in inspiration which was to renew, and purify, Scottish song. Those hours of transport with little Jenny at her old-fashioned piano were engrossingly happy, in truth, with one exception, the happiest he spent in Edinburgh.

Inevitably in this time of weary, irritating, disastrous waiting, certain former haunts and companions saw much of him. There were plenty to drink with him, to roar out

compliments and declare in hiccoughing, slithering voices that beyond doubt he was the king of good fellows, and John Barleycorn the king of pleasures. They were proud of him, proud of the poet of Scotch Drink which was better than drunken Bacchus, with his vines and wines, ever tasted.

Phoebus Apollo, the darling of the gods, a hero of Edinburgh pot-houses. Did he enjoy the honour? The author of "The Jolly Beggars" might be supposed to be in his element; the author of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" to be nauseated and distressed. There were hours of heedless, reckless dissipation; there were also hours of sickening revulsion. And, as we shall see, the aftermath was to be exceedingly bitter.

He may have been the readier to accept their company and join in their debauches, that day by day he was becoming more and more acutely conscious of indifference in high places. No use blinking the fact, the tide of interest, of curiosity had turned, definitely turned. He was no longer the lion he had been so short a time before. The "nobility and gentry" were finding another plaything, another "wonder" to patronize. He tried to be stoical (for him as impossible as for fire to be ice), telling himself that he knew it must come, but that luckily the rock, the impregnable rock, of independence was still left. In the reaction the tavern brought the blessed anodyne of forgetfulness.

Inevitably, too, he had his love affair as though he could not endure emptiness of heart. "A poet without love" observes a wise judge, "were a physical and metaphysical impossibility." He justified the judgment to the last jot and tittle. Margaret Chalmers, his latest goddess, was winsome and womanly, sensible and practical, proud of his admiration, yet tremblingly afraid to risk her happiness in his hands. But her interest, her understanding,

and her refinement were a beneficent influence in a time of deadly peril.

So the weeks and the months wore by. Summer passed into autumn; autumn into winter. Again the town buzzed with the doings of the rich and idle, questing desperately for pleasure. But his appearance among them was rarer and rarer. He read the lesson quite correctly. It was time to be gone, he told Margaret Chalmers. Creech alone detained him, and Creech blandly answered all demands with—Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow. Fuming inwardly, eating his heart out, Burns was forced to go on waiting with such diversions as were available. You may say, and say with truth, that Creech with his fair promises, his evasions and delays, was morally responsible for much of a tragic kind that followed. If—if he had paid up as he should have paid; and if Margaret Chalmers had said "Yes" instead of "No" to her poet-lover, what a different tale there might be to tell.

But unseen, unsuspected, Destiny was setting the stage for quite other things.

CHAPTER 10

THE stage is set then for a new act, more enthralling while it lasted than any that went before. Enter accordingly a new heroine, especially cast by Fate for the part.

Just lately Burns had added to the list of his acquaintances, Nimmo, an Excise officer of Alison Square, whose maiden sister and housekeeper had a bosom friend, Mrs. Agnes Craig McLehose. The lady was young, attractive, and unfortunate, a grass widow, in fact, with a truant husband in the West Indies. She was also romantic, poetic, pious, impressionable, overflowing with the delicate "sensitivity" of the time, and obliged to feed a starving heart on dreams and thoughts of what might have been. You perceive here the tinder that a spark sets off. A year before from her solitude in the purlieus of Potter Row, she had watched, with bated breath and quickened pulse, the tumultuous ado over the new prodigy; then she read his poetry, and all her facile ardour was on fire.

"You really must introduce us," she told Miss Nimmo. "Will your modesty be shocked if I confess I am dying to meet him?"

Modesty was not shocked. Therefore one Thursday evening in December, there was a select little party in Alison Square, with the unsuspecting lion on exhibition.

"Two poets," beamed Miss Nimmo, completing her part of the contract.

Burns bowed handsomely, he was becoming an expert in the fine art of bowing.

"A poet, Madam. This doubles the pleasure, and the honour," he added gallantly.

Mrs. McLehose was giddy with excitement; but it was in a tone of forced lightness she replied.

"Oh! I sometimes rhyme just to amuse myself and

while away lonely hours. But nothing I could write would be worth your notice."

He smiled down upon her. "Don't you think I should be the judge of that? May I be favoured with a sight of some of your pieces?"

"On one condition," she answered, flushing hotly under the look in his black eyes. "That you forbear to criticize."

"I am utterly unskilled in the cant of criticism," he assured her. "I read for pleasure and profit, and have generally found that pleasure is profit."

An admirable start. All evening the lion was his most fascinating, seductive self, the soul of gallantry and eager, as always, to make an impression. A poetess! Who knew? perhaps another Sappho, all fire and passion. At any rate a change. Moreover, she was decidedly good to look upon. For the reader's benefit, here is her picture as drawn by a contemporary hand:

"Short in stature, her form was graceful, her hands and feet small and delicate. Her features were regular and pleasing, her eyes lustrous, her complexion fair, her cheeks ruddy, and a well-formed mouth displayed teeth beautifully white."

That night, carried away by the excitement and fascination of the moment, she appeared both beautiful and brilliant. In intimate give-and-take, she talked with Apollo of poetry, the domestic affections, the sacredness of love, the delights of religion: and he, wise with the wisdom of a vast experience, said many charming, many thrilling, and before all was over, a few dangerous things.

"My dear," she confided to Miss Nimmo at parting, "he's past expression, wonderful. I can only say what the amazed Queen of Sheba said of Solomon, that the half has not been told."

Miss Nimmo smiled a worldly-wise smile. "What a pity, my dear, you are married."

A quick, troubled look overcast the shining, eager face.

"Oh! don't remind me of that. I was only seventeen,

what did I know of men? And he *was* handsome and flattered me to the top of my bent."

"We never learn our lesson, some of us," thought Miss Nimmo, who was safely past all the perils, all the rocks and shoals on which passion makes shipwreck.

"But, Mr. Burns," the ardent little idealist went on, brightening again. "But there, I mustn't say more or you'd begin to suspect things. Don't forget that you have promised to take tea with him and me on Saturday evening."

"I'll be there," said Miss Nimmo, her eyes twinkling. "And, who knows? he may see me home. The streets are fine and dark these nights." And she laughed her good-humoured, sonsie laugh.

She appeared punctually in her "Sunday braws" at the house in General's Entry, Potter Row. But no Burns came. Instead there came a note of regret and apology. A drunken coachman had capsized him the night before, and he was a prisoner, with a wrenched knee-cap. To this information, he took occasion to add that he had never met anyone whom he "more anxiously wished" to meet again. He was "intoxicated with the idea"; and "if I don't see you again, I shall not rest in my grave for chagrin . . . I cannot bear the idea of leaving Edinburgh without seeing you." Mrs. McLehose read the note breathlessly, flushed, laughed and passed it to her visitor.

"Ho!" commented Miss Nimmo. "It's het kail we hae here, as the man said when he took a sup and burned his mouth. And you a married woman. Agnes! He ought to think shame. But isn't he just fine at the English, for all he's a ploughman!"

Mrs. McLehose was quivering with trepidation and joy.

"And yesterday, he sent me some poetry. Yes, his own, his very own, composed as soon as he got back to his room after our supper with you. Beautiful, beautiful. Truly poetical."

"Truly poetical," repeated Miss Nimmo who had the

solid, prosaic person's distrust of the truly poetical. So far as she could see life was not truly poetical; therefore, she supposed poetry must be something fanciful, vaporous, that one could neither taste nor handle, a thing about as substantial as a rainbow, a sort of airy bubble, in fact, such as boys blow from soap suds.

"Oh! he's a true poet," Mrs. McLehose declared. "The only one I have ever met." Then on a hard breath, like one dreading the answer. "Sarah dear, do—do you think he can be a bad man, as people say?"

Sarah took a leisurely sip of tea. "It's not for me to judge, Agnes. Tales are going round. They say—you know what they say."

"But your opinion, Sarah. Your opinion."

"I'd be thinking he's just the natural man, no better and little waur than the lave of his kind," Sarah answered slowly. "Men are as God made them, the best of them, and I suppose He knows why He made them as they are, though it's a puzzle whiles. As for Mr. Burns, may be it's just a case of lead us not into temptation."

Agnes caught at the suggestion. "That's it, that's it. At every turn he is tempted. Everybody running after him; pleasure spreading her snares, women sighing and flattering. What wonder if he steps aside at times? But I'm sure he's not bad at heart. That face! Often and often I have dreamed of the face of a poet."

"Now you've seen it," interpolated Sarah with a sly chuckle. "Is it up to your dreams?"

"My dear, how you do joke. Up to my dreams! I could see pure, heavenly inspiration in it. It lights up, oh! how it lights up. You'd think his very soul was looking out at you."

"His soul! I know nothing about men's souls. It's their stomachs I'm concerned with mostly. That brother of mine. But we'll let him be. There's worse going. As for your poet, there's no denying he has a way with him.

Ask the Duchess of Gordon about that. I'm told it was near being a runaway business. He should have wired in and done it. My word, that would be something to talk about. By all accounts he's the kind of man to make the heart of a woman go pirly-wirly, as we used to say."

She glanced at the letter, which she still held.

"And he can't bear the idea of going away without seeing you again. Is the broken knee a blessing in disguise, do you think?"

"He'll be dreadfully lonely, poor fellow," said Agnes, in her intentness missing the tone of banter. "It would be a mercy to call and cheer him up."

"A real Angel's visit. And tomorrow it would be all over the town that we were out hunting a man. I think we'd better put off paying our visit of comfort for a bit. Folk are so fond of talking and giving things the twist they want."

To the clear-eyed Sarah one thing was clear, that however Burns felt or pretended to feel, Agnes, poor soul, was badly smitten. After an hour's heart to heart talk she went her way, pondering.

"Agnes McLehose," she said to herself, "take care, take care what you are doing. Women of your stamp should not play with fire."

She owned to herself that Burns was the most fascinating man she ever met. His face, his eyes, his manners, also his soul (she supposed) were all that Agnes said or thought them. She liked him extremely, though he had never made the blood flood her face and surge back to her heart a torrent of emotion. But his reputation! Agnes McLehose had better look out what she was doing.

And while Sarah thought thus, Agnes was writing in a headlong ecstasy. "You shall not leave without seeing me. I am determined to see you. Adieu, keep up your heart; you will soon get well, and we shall meet."

In spite of all warnings of prudence the die was cast.

CHAPTER 11

CALLING next evening to condole with his crippled friend, Nicol chuckled maliciously over something Sarah Nimmo told him an hour before with nods and smiles, and an air of piquant expectation.

"Already," laughed Burns when he heard. "There's a nose for you. Well?"

"Well! my dear fellow, I'd be careful with a grass widow," said Nicol whose frailties were not of the erotic kind. "They're kittle cattle by all accounts."

"Heyday," cried Burns. "But, my dear Willie, tell me this, cannot an honest man have a prepossession for a fine woman without running his head against an intrigue?"

Nicol grimaced. "Especially when the honest man is love's own laureate, Robert Burns."

"Here's a leg up to vanity," quoth Burns. "Where are your Greece and Rome, with their Aphrodites, now? But set your troubled mind at peace. The lady is taking no unknown risks. She has it on my word of honour that I have not the most distant pretensions to the virtues of a saint or an archangel, or belong in the smallest degree to the adorable, never-sufficiently-to-be-extolled order of the unco guid and the rigidly righteous."

"Faith! she'll be wise to take the assurance seriously," Nicol exercised without compunction a friend's privilege to be blunt. "Is she responsive?" he asked, recalling Sarah Nimmo's words and looks.

Burns laughed softly over thoughts of his own.

"Responsive! Certainly not. A powder magazine isn't responsive to a lighted torch, is it?"

"Lord!" said Nicol. "It takes a poet to set the fires of passion blazing. May I ask—?"

"God's benison! haven't I told you?" interrupted Burns. "I know what's running in your suspicious head."

Nicol arched an eyebrow interrogatively. "I make no insinuations," he said.

"No, you just let on you smell a rat. A certain notorious poet, shall we say? has gone and broken several of the Ten Commandments, and, sinner that he is, shows neither sign nor symptom of penitence. What is worse, he vaunts his outrageous wickedness in rhymes that move good men to spasms and convulsions of rage."

"Agreed," chuckled Nicol. "But there's this to be said for him, that he disdains to be a hypocrite."

"Yes, I believe he's quite free from the popular and highly remunerative vice of hypocrisy. Your profligate of a poet, you see how well I understand him, meets a lovely and gifted woman and has the sense to appreciate her. But mark this—whatever he is, she is the soul of piety safely entrenched behind the ramparts of virtue. And harkee, my scoffing moralist, it may be that in the purity of her heart, she pities the sinner and would fain rescue and reform him. Then, think how the angels in Heaven would weep for joy."

Nicol guffawed ironically. "Beautiful, beautiful. Well! go ahead. Let the peerie spin. And for encouragement bear this in mind, that from China to Peru a bold adventurous lover captivates womankind. Besides there is the incentive of illustrious examples."

"As for instance?"

"Endless instances. In olden time, to pick at random, there was David, the man after God's own heart. How odd God should have chosen *him*. And mind you Bathsheba was the mother of Solomon, a lucky stroke, though it cost poor Uriah his life. Then there was Pericles, the glory of Athens, and a very fine woman was Mistress Aspasia, let me tell you. The great Julius, too, who conquered the world, and made his little philanderings the stock joke of

his soldiery. 'Here comes bald head, look to your wives.' In the modern world, Louis of France with his La Pompadour; Charlie of England and his Nellie; and, to be quite up to date, our own gallant, elegant Geordie of Wales, whose conquests would move the envy of an amorous Sultan."

"Glorious," cried Burns. "Anything else while the tide of wisdom and knowledge is in flood?"

"Only this, that as our poet has himself perceived, a good woman yearns to undertake the work of reform. To snatch a brand from the burning, wash a black sheep white, fills her dear heart with pure heavenly joy."

"Who would not sin for sake of such a woman," laughed Burns. "But, hark thee, my dear Socrates, one small thing thou hast forgotten. This is not a case of the spider and the fly; neither is it a case of washing a black sheep white. It is—mark it for thy edification—it is an adventure in high friendship, otherwise an adventure in pure poesy of which peradventure thou, in the bliss of ignorance, knowest nothing."

They laughed together: then both refreshed themselves liberally.

Nicol went off grinning, Burns turned to Jenny Cruickshank and the ravishing study of old Scots airs. But for once he heard with a preoccupied ear, and presently with no ear at all. Damn Nicol, with his persiflage, his snickering, his innuendoes, his half truths edged with irony. A good fellow, Nicol, but what did he, the tippling earth-born son of Bacchus, know of the finer passions, the raptures of a poet formed for love? His divinity, God bless him! was a bottle.

And Sarah Nimmo, had she been letting her supple tongue wag? Burns wondered how much she knew, how far she was in the confidence of her friend Agnes. As for talk, Edinburgh was evidently as black a gossip-hole as

Mauchline itself—with far more tongues to wag. Of a sudden he interrupted Jenny.

"Thank you, my dear," he said. "But I'm afraid I'm not in the mood for music tonight. Another time."

Creech came to comfort him, suave, ruby-faced, complacent, self-important.

"Is it painful, Burns?" he asked, viewing the bandaged leg stretched out on cushions.

"Damnably."

"Too bad, too bad. Drivers of hackney coaches should be under proper supervision. When I'm on Town Council, I'll see to it that something is done. Maiming honest folk like this! It won't do, it simply won't do."

He walked to the window and looked over a grey, sodden landscape to the dun hills of Fife.

"A bit Decemberish," he remarked, turning back to the grateful warmth of the fire. "Still with a good coal fire to toast herself at, what does the Muse care for outside conditions? It's leisure and a cosy atmosphere she likes. I'll expect another big batch of poetry from you." He beamed, rubbing his hands, as one who imparts a bright commercial idea.

"Devil a line, William Creech, till you pay for what you have." Mr. Creech gurgled delectably over the pleasantry.

"You haven't lost your talent for joking anyway. What it is to be born a humourist. Well! how's this?"

With an air of high benevolence, he counted out five guineas, dropping them one by one with a golden clink on the table beside Burns.

"There, that'll keep the fun of the fair going a while longer. Put money in thy purse. Ha, ha! And now, I must be off to think out a little speech for the Speculative, a Society we have formed for the felicity of hearing ourselves talk. My dear friend, this world is full of vanity."

"Full to the brim and running over," said Burns, as his visitor retreated gracefully.

He looked at the money on the table. Five guineas where there ought to be a hundred. Mr. Creech understood his business. Humbugged, fobbed off with doles and cheek and sophistry—and a prisoner with a wrenched knee. Certainly a soothing, comforting, inspiriting situation.

He turned his thoughts to other things, and, taking counsel of his heart, wrote to the new Goddess:

"I am resolved to cultivate your friendship with the enthusiasm of religion."

Nothing warmer just yet, save a touching word of sympathy and pity for a charming, gifted woman, abominably misused by Fate. Experimentally he added some verses nicely adapted to the occasion. With flattering alacrity, she responded in a feminine flutter (how well he knew that flutter!) and half in joy, half in fear, enclosed some verses of her own. In a passing whim she signed them Clarinda. Enchanted with the Arcadian suggestion, he answered rapturously as Sylvander; and lo! two more names were added to love's immortal calendar.

One thing he scorned to do: he would not fly under false colours. Therefore, as Nicol was told, he gently warned his eager, ardent correspondent.

"I don't know if you have a just idea of my character, but I wish you to see me *as I am*. . . . I am, as most people of my trade are, a strange will-o'-the-wisp being, the victim, too frequently, of much imprudence and many follies. My great constituent elements are pride and passion; the first I have endeavoured to humanize into integrity and honour; the last makes me a devotee to the warmest degree of enthusiasm in love, religion, and friendship, either of them, or all together, as I happen to be inspired."

There, madam, you know what to expect. Risk it, if you like; and Heaven grant you may, but don't say you

have not been warned. False tactics, says the neophyte. The man of experience knew better. Not for nothing had he given fervid hours and heart-wrung sighs to the practical study of feminine psychology.

Of old he had plumed himself on his "skill at a *billet doux*." From early youth he had practised the delectable art; first with bounding glee as proxy for lovelorn, inarticulate ploughmen; then, with an artist's cunning and a poet's fervency of phrase, *in propria persona* just to prove how easily and surely he could bring any saucy Miss pop down at his feet. Now a pastmaster, in his own expressive words, "an old hawk at the game," he was primed and ready for any adventure the little god Eros might devise.

And he was the readier for adventure seeing that the great, the fashionable were turning to other idols. They were finding someone else to exclaim over, patronize, and bedevil with drink and flattery. But yet another incentive urged him on his new course. Hitherto his flames had been mostly country lasses, bucolic wenches, as crude, as near the savage state, almost, as the cows they milked or the pigs and calves they fed. But a poetess, apt to understand and reciprocate "nameless feelings," which tact and delicacy left unnamed. Delicious, fascinating, inflaming.

Of course, if Mary had not been taken from him, torn, as it were, from his very arms, everything would be different. Ah! she was all poetry, because she was all love. But Mary was sleeping her dreamless sleep under the immemorial yew in the West Kirkyard, Greenock, a spot imprinted for ever on his heart.

And Jean, the too—too fond and facile Jean! Down in Mauchline, Jean was again white-faced from mortal dread of what was coming. He knew now that fresh trouble of a dire sort was brewing in that quarter, and guessed, all too easily, that the second storm would be many, many degrees more terrible than the first. Ah! well, no use worrying. What was done, was done, and things would be as

they would. Sowing and reaping, sowing and reaping! They followed each other like day and night. You sowed and in due season you reaped—whatever harvest might be. All quite in the foreordained order of Nature.

Still there was no valid reason for brooding on the evil day and declining the gifts vouchsafed by Providence, which was really extremely indulgent. Gallantry apart, he was in sore need of sympathy, of companionship. Clarinda promised both; and he turned to her as the tempest-driven mariner turns to a haven of refuge.

CHAPTER 12

TAKING breath after the first heady plunge, Clarinda prudently repaid warning with warning.

"Like yourself," she confessed to the fervid Sylvander (the commerce was still epistolary), "I am a bit of an enthusiast. In religion and friendship, quite a bigot; perhaps I could be in love, too," a hopeful admission, but lest he should expect the impossible, she was quick to add that "Everything dear to me in heaven and earth forbids. This is my fixed principle and the person who would dare to endeavour to remove it, I would hold my chief enemy."

"Ah!" thought Sylvander, a little damped. "The angel with the flaming sword at the gate of Paradise, barring entrance." No need, however, to take the warning too seriously. The angel might grow weary of keeping guard.

Meanwhile she agreed and here was sweet encouragement, that an honest man might have a predilection for a woman "whose soul would abhor the idea of an intrigue." Plain platonic sailing, you see, over a sunlit ocean with the islands of the blest just over the horizon. Only like a point of fire, there slipped out by inadvertence, perhaps, the admission:

"Had I been a man, I should have been you. I am formed with a liveliness of fancy, a strength of passion little inferior. Nature threw me off in the same mould just after you." They were born in the same year within three months of each other, because, she supposed, "the carline, Nature, had a flying visit of Venus and the Graces." Venus and the Graces! Ha, ha, if that did not mean what the adventurous amorist wished it to mean, what then did it mean?

For New Year's greeting she piously wished that "Each revolving year may find you *wiser and happier*." (The italics are hers.) He may well have smiled. Virtue, wisdom,

happiness. Noble ideals, thrice glorious trinity. But how was the natural man with all his natural infirmities thick upon him, to translate them into conduct? Still one never knew. Some day, some fair distant day, he might at least be wise even should it turn out that to be wise was not to be happy.

To sweeten good counsel, which is apt to have an acid flavour, she rounded off with a poem.

Talk not of Love! it gives me pain—
For Love has been my foe;
He bound me in an iron chain!
And plunged me deep in woe.

The "hand of friendship" I accept—
May honour be our guard!
Virtue our intercourse direct
Her smiles our dear reward.

Sylvander was transported. No, he would not talk of love. And her friendship! By Heaven, he was never proud before. This to Clarinda herself. To Dicky Brown, sailor of Irvine and early mentor in carnal pleasure he wrote more explicitly:

"Almighty love still reigns and revels in my bosom; and I am at this moment ready to hang myself for a young Edinburgh widow, who has wit and wisdom more murderously fatal than the assassinating stiletto of the Sicilian bandit or the poisoned arrow of the African savage."

So perilous was his condition that for fear of "Spring tide paroxysms" he must needs put a cherished Highland dirk safely out of the way, one more proof that poets and lovers are adepts in the high falutin'. Unhappily there was another side to the shield. To Peggy Chalmers, as yet more intimately in his confidence than the divine Clarinda, he gave a glimpse of the troubled darkness within.

"Misfortune, bodily constitution, hell and myself," a deadly "quadruple alliance" made the tints of his mind vie with "the livid horror preceding a midnight thunder-

storm." Looking gloomily into the future, he saw in his path "that meagre, squalid, famine-faced spectre, poverty." Alas! and alas! patrons were growing cold or entirely forgetting; grandees were turning away, and from Creech and his evasive parsimonious clan there was little hope or none. Indigence, hunger! What did they care, so long as they had their fatted calf and their costly pleasures? He brooded bitterly, and out of the brooding came a self-judgment which leaves critic and censor without a word to add or alter.

"My worst enemy is *Moimême*. I lie so miserably open to the inroads and incursions of a mischievous, light-armed, well-mounted banditti under the banners of imagination, whim, caprice and passion; and the heavy-armed veteran regulars of wisdom, prudence and forethought, move so very, very slow that I am almost in a state of perpetual warfare, and alas! frequent defeat."

In spite of streaks of exhilarating brightness life had in truth the haunting ghastliness of a nightmare. For one thing, he was in dire need of cash, and Creech's behaviour was atrocious, with his airy insolence, his feline suavity, his misplaced flattery, his fine, empty promises.

But more perturbing yet, the lengthened chain which bound him to Mauchline became more and more galling. Dark and ever darker reports came respecting the state of things there; then one day a quite definite report which was like a stunning blow on the heart. The thing he feared had happened. Suddenly and without warning, an infuriated father had thrust Jean out of doors to fend as she might or could, and the wretched girl was sobbing her heart out under the care of William Muir, miller, of Fail near Tarbolton, and his pitying wife.

All too vividly Burns could visualize the situation—James Armour in a ramping fury of religiosity, his vixenish wife, venomous as a hissing snake, inciting and egging him on; and the outcast Jean fleeing in terror from their anger and cruelty, with himself once more as the arch villain, the chief cause of the devastating calamity. The

whole countryside would be ablaze. He could hear the foul snickering, see the gloating looks, the winks, the nods, the nudges. And the dumb misery at Mossziel. The brave, good little woman who had endured so much with a love that never faltered, she would keep tightly shut lips. But he saw her shame-stricken face, as in a mirror, and he knew, oh! too well he knew, how her heart must bleed in secret.

"Mother," he gulped, in an agony of remorse and self-condemnation, "oh! mother of mine, why, why did you bring forth such a son, a cause of shame to you, a curse, a tragedy to himself?"

His surging thoughts turned pitifully to Jean. After all, she, poor girl, bore the brunt of the storm. He felt for her honestly and sincerely. She had incensed and humiliated him, as he had vowed, past forgiveness; but he now knew she did it under coercion. And because of him, because of her own fondness, her passionate efforts to win back his love, she was in blacker disgrace than ever, the object of wrath ten times fiercer (were that possible) than the old. True, he "made up" with her in a high cavalier spirit, half pique, half pride, as though to prove that when he chose to pipe, she could not but choose to dance. She had fallen into his arms, and—well! what could you expect?

Now, down in Ayrshire, she was calling piteously; and he was here a lame hero, a crippled gallant at the mercy of a not too skilful surgeon and a publisher who would not disburse what he owed. Exasperating, humiliating, yet what was he to do? What but smile and smile and pretend, ostrich like, there were no perils, no snags in the fair prospect! Above all he must be true to his own motto, "I Dare and Again I Dare." And he would dare. It takes an intrepid spirit to trip gaily along the brink of the abyss as though it did not exist; but then, like his vaunted hero, the Miltonic Satan, Robert Burns never lacked courage, were it only the courage of despair.

Of course he must look after Jean. She was a charge on

his honour. Presently he would see her, and she would cling to him with tears and entreaties; and he would kiss and comfort her till she smiled again. It was never hard to make her smile.

Meantime, there was Clarinda and Clarinda had graces and accomplishments which made Jean appear the mere crude, illiterate child of nature. According to the rules of the game, a poet must be doubly a poet when he serves under the banner of Venus.

Ten days on cushions so far restored the injured leg that he was able to hobble about his room "with as much hilarity as a May frog leaping across the newly harrowed ridges." Then, one crisp day in January, with a polar sun glittering on a snow-and-frost-bound land, he ordered a sedan chair for a round of visits. He was to see Nicol and Miss Nimmo for a little friendly gossip; but first he must see Clarinda; it was imperative he should see her, if he saw no one else. He went to the meeting with nerves tingling and arteries beating a dizzying music of mingled hope and doubt.

She was waiting for him in an excitement greater than his own, with her two boys, mere infants, much too young to be observant or critical. He entered, leaning on a staff; she hastily set a chair for him, and took his arm, her mere touch thrilling like electricity. He sat down heavily; then smiling up at her, remarked, "Henceforth a new article will be added to my creed—a prayer for all lame men."

Flushed and bright-eyed, she sat down facing him, with earnest enquiries for his leg.

"It was brave of you to venture out," she said, with an eloquent look. "The streets are treacherous and slippery up here. I hope your chairmen are more reliable than your hackney coachman was."

"They swear by all their hopes of Heaven, they never touch liquor till their day's work is done, and everybody who may need a chair is safely abed. I call that most Chris-

tianly considerate."

She smiled sympathetically. "I hope there will be no more accidents."

"Amen to that. Still it's an ill wind. The proverb does come true at times. As you know, I meant to be off to Ayrshire; but the gods who know how to be gracious on occasion, have granted me this felicity instead."

She blushed, murmuring, "A poet, a poet, always a poet."

The ice once broken, she gave her native vivacity free play. He let her run on while, so to speak, he spied out the land. Flushed, excited, eager, yet withal modest and demure, she was exceedingly attractive. Her clear, hazel eyes, now all aglow, her retroussé nose with its dainty suggestion of impishness, her inviting ripe, red lips and her general air of blended tenderness and animation, made an alluring picture. Her figure, too—and there he reckoned himself a judge second to none—was a delight to the eye. Slightly inclined to embonpoint, perhaps, but that was no present defect, whatever it might be ten or twenty years hence. It seemed to be made for melting into a lover's arms. Then her speech had the soft cadence, the subtle winsome quality of good breeding, an excellent thing in woman.

As she poured out tea, he noticed, not without satisfaction, that her hand trembled a little. Sensibility, how charming, he thought. Over the tea cups there were delicious flights into the high realms of Poetry, Religion, and Friendship, a feast of soul and sentiment. On Friendship, its virtues, consolations, and pure uplifting joys, she was entrancingly eloquent. Surely, surely it was one of Heaven's most precious boons. He warmly agreed. One thing only was better, he ventured to submit, and that was almighty, all conquering Love. But at that her face clouded forbiddingly, and he tactfully sheered off.

By degrees the talk became personal and intimate, slipping insensibly into confidences. With surprising frank-

ness, Clarinda related some touching passages in her own sad, secret history; and Sylvander, chivalrously sympathetic, responded with certain selected incidents from his own varied career. At a critical point in his narration, he paused, as one mentally debating just how far to go. Then, greatly venturing, he mentioned the lamentable situation in Mauchline. He watched her intently. Would she be shocked, curl up and switch off, or would she appreciate his candour? She was appreciative. He breathed deeply. Ah! Wonderful virtue of artful confession. As an accomplished student of womankind, he was not mistaken then. Clarinda was very, very sorry for Jean; but studiously forbore to blame Jean's lover. One pertinent question, however, she asked.

"What of the future?"

"I am done with her," he answered with emphasis; and told how Jean had rejected and humiliated him.

"She must have been mad," was Clarinda's instant verdict. In a softer tone, she added, "But you mustn't be unkind. Remember she is only a 'woman.'"

"To make the scales of justice balance," was the quick rejoinder, "will Clarinda remember that I am only a man?"

"Clarinda could never forget that," was the murmured response.

When the chairmen returned at the end of an hour, he seemed to have been there but a brief five minutes. With a sigh of regret, he rose, Clarinda again assisting. At the door he bent over her hand.

"This has been Paradise," he said, looking into her face and still holding her hand. "May I come again?"

Under the glow of his black eyes, her own fell. A moment she was silent; then as one who is aware of doing a hazardous thing, yet is unable to resist, she looked up.

"You may come again," she answered in a low voice.

Decidedly the die was cast.

CHAPTER 13

NEXT day, to complete his self-delineation, Sylvander sent Clarinda a copy of an autobiography he had recently written for Dr. Moore, novelist and father of the hero of Corunna, assuring her, "It is truth, every word of it, and will give you a just idea of a man whom you have honoured with your friendship." She read it with a swelling heart and tears of sensibility, repeating Desdemona's "'twas pitiful; 'twas wond'rous pitiful." The account of his first love affair revived rainbow gleams of her own girlish romance. "Ah! my friend," she responded, "our early love emotions are surely the most exquisite." As though giving a delicate hint how well she understood, she naïvely advised him against the risk of wedlock. "For unless a woman were qualified for the companion, the friend and the mistress, she would not do for you. The last might gain Sylvander; but the others alone would keep him."

Sylvander smiled complacently as he read. "Getting on," he thought.

One thing grieved her. Why, oh! why, was he hostile to the doctrines of the great John Calvin, as he undoubtedly showed himself in certain pieces she had read in wondering delight at their brilliancy and shuddering pain over their irreverence, their profanity.

Religion on the lips of a pretty woman must always be fascinating. And fortunately it was with perfect sincerity he could assure the anxious Clarinda of the soundness of his heart and faith.

"He who is our Author and Preserver and will one day be our Judge, must be—not for His sake in the way of duty, but from the native impulses of our hearts—the object of our reverential awe and grateful adoration. A mind

pervaded, actuated and governed by purity, truth and charity, though it does not *merit* Heaven, yet is an absolutely necessary pre-requisite, without which Heaven can neither be obtained nor enjoyed. These are my tenets, my lovely friend." That a touch of Burns, the humorist, should not be lacking, he added that his creed was pretty nearly that of the honest Ayrshire weaver who prayed:

"Lord grant that we may lead a gude life; for a gude life makes a gude end; at least, it helps weel."

Finally, that there might be no mistake concerning Sylvander, the amorist, there followed in the grand style an apostrophe to the troublesome God, Eros—

"Oh! thou perfidious, cruel, mischief-making demon who presidest o'er that frantic passion—thou mayest, thou dost poison my peace; but thou shalt not taint my honour."

Clarinda might breathe in safety; and to that skilful touch she responded with the tremulous thrill of an Aeolian harp. A fond economist she would fain make the best of two worlds generally in fierce antagonism, the world of love and the world of religion. God himself being love, and therefore, the pure essence of religion, it could never be wrong, she argued with herself, for His creatures also to love within the bounds of modesty and decorum. Charming feminine logic, that would yoke Ariel and Caliban. Chastened, hallowed by religion, Sylvander's impetuous ardours would be in strict conformity with the Divine plan of felicity. So there came again the subtle encouragement that assuredly she had been a man "but for some mistake of nature"; and if a man, then certainly a Sylvander. Had he read Fielding's "Amelia"? If not, would he do so and think of *her*? She could easily imagine a man fond of his wife "yet (Sylvander-like) hurried into momentary deviations while his heart remained faithful." Were she the wife, and here surely was a tender hint, she would not only forgive, but "comfort and speak kindly

and in secret only weep." Sylvander's heart throbbed. Ah! here was a fine understanding, a delicate appreciation of the trials and temptation of a passion-tossed amonist. Yes. Clarinda understood.

Nor did she forget or omit the touch of young romance which gives to passion its celestial, crystalline hues, as of many-coloured fairy glass. He was a prisoner, but happily she was free. Let him then look from his window at a certain hour on a certain afternoon, and he would see his Clarinda crossing his Square. She would look up and smile; thus they could at least get a glimpse of each other. She missed that felicity, however, because she did not look high enough. In his disappointment, Sylvander was betrayed into expressions which brought the warning, "Take care lest virtue demand even friendship as a sacrifice"; but the rebuke was softened by the fond injunction, "Be wise, be prudent, be happy."

With the glowing rhetoric of a lover and a poet, he protested that he had "sins to Heaven," but "none to you," aptly capping the protest with Bolingbroke's appeal to Swift, "Adieu, dear Swift, with all thy faults I love thee entirely; make an effort to love me with all mine." Thus justified, he paid his second visit to General's Entry, and left Clarinda dizzy with delight.

"I will not deny, Sylvander," she made haste to write next morning, "that last night was one of the most exquisite I ever experienced."

Still, her sensitive conscience was perturbed. The circumstances were delicate. Had she observed the proper reserve? What would Sylvander think of her, what would certain other people think of her, if they knew? Above all, dare she think that Heaven would approve? Here was a chance for the lover to assert himself, turn priest, dispel doubts, salve conscience and give absolution. "Oh! Clarinda! why do you wound my soul by hinting that last night would lessen my opinion of you?" What were the

facts? Greatly privileged he had been admitted behind the scenes; and what did he find? "A bosom glowing with honour and benevolence; a mind ennobled by genius, informed and refined by education and reflection and exalted by native religion, genuine as in the climes of Heaven; a heart formed for all the glorious meltings of friendship, love and pity. I saw the noblest immortal soul creation ever showed me."

Was ever woman in such humour wooed; was ever woman in such humour won? The moralist might shrink or shy; the woman was charmed out of all doubts and hesitations, at any rate, for the moment. Immediately he received permission to call again. "Come to tea, if you please. But eight o'clock would be an hour less liable to interruption." Less liable to interruption. Oh! whistle and I'll come to you, my lad. He made the hour eight, and Paradise was more exquisitely Paradise than before. The visit was not an hour over when he was writing:

"My ever dearest, Clarinda, you have stolen away my soul. What a delicious draught is the hour of tender endearment! Beauty and Grace in the arms of Truth and Honour, in all the luxury of mutual love." And Clarinda, tingling to her inmost fibre, wished she could look into his heart, which "would only be fair, for you have the key of mine." Still her Puritan conscience again took fright, and proceeded, as a frightened conscience will, to raise appalling bogeys. In her commotion, she thought of the sermon she heard that Sunday afternoon in the Tolbooth Parish Church from the minister, the Rev. John Kemp, an admirable Christian man, would that Sylvander knew him. But instead of taking the hint, Sylvander drew for her this rapturous vision:

"Don't you see us hand-in-hand, or rather with my arm about your lovely waist, making our remarks on Sirius . . . or in a shady bower of Mercury or Venus, dedicating the hour to love in mutual converse, relying honour and

revelling endearment, while the most exalted strains of poesy and harmony would be the ready spontaneous language of our souls?" Nothing here of the devout Kemp and his Sunday sermon.

Another visit with yet tenderer, more endearing scenes, and Clarinda awaking from dreams next morning, "received a summons from conscience to appear at the Bar of Reason." What Reason said to Conscience, was very disquieting indeed, the gist of the lecture being that, she must shut her heart "against the fascinating intrusion of the passions." Hence she dared not see him on Saturday, as they had arranged.

"I cannot serve two masters," she wailed. "God pity me."

Yet the ink was scarcely dry on the note of denial, when she was demanding feverishly, "Why have I not heard from you, Sylvander?" They were about to part; she wished the parting were over, because her "violent heart-agitations" threatened to unhinge her "very soul." But while wishing thus, she did not know how she was to bear the ordeal. They were capable of the most Heavenly ardency of love. "Let us seek," she pleaded piteously, "to repose it in the bosom of our God."

Interpreting such violent symptoms quite correctly, the lover once more assumed the priestly cap:

"Be reconciled, my angel, to your God, yourself and me: and I pledge you Sylvander's honour that you shall never have reason to complain of his conduct. Now, my Love, do not wound our next meeting with any averted looks or restrained caresses."

Clarinda shed tears of joy and distress; but unhappily her panic-stricken conscience would not be quieted. And very soon she had other causes of agitation. The gossips, ever a vigilant sect, were getting to work on what seemed a case of exceptional interest and promise. Sarah Nimmo looked wise, gurgled, and put a finger meaningly

to her lips. Others, less kind, indulged in insinuation and from insinuation proceeded to damaging statement. Suddenly Clarinda found herself, "scolded, under-valued, abused, and wantonly insulted." One, who fancied he had claims upon her, wrote a "haughty, dictatorial letter" which (passed on in perturbation) roused Sylvander to fury. The "Puritanic scrawl" was "damned sophistry," emanating from "the half-inch soul of an unfeeling, cold-blooded, pitiful Presbyterian bigot." Hades was his proper place. True, Sylvander owned to Clarinda, "matters are grown serious between us." But why should she be distressed? He was hers forever.

"I esteem you; I love you as a friend; I admire and love you as a woman beyond anyone in all the circle of creation."

If only the inconsiderate wretch of a husband in the West Indies would die (as there was fair hope and chance he would soon), then the sole barrier to perfect bliss would disappear; and a gossiping, censorious world witness the crown and consummation of a celestial love affair.

On that final passionate assurance, Sylvander took a tender farewell for a little while, and left for Mauchline, taking with him Clarinda's heart and her gift of "twa wee sarkies" for Jean's baby son at Mossiel, the girl being still with her mother.

He was to be absent for three weeks.

CHAPTER 14

OSTENSIBLY Burns had two pressing pieces of business to transact—first, to complete or reject the lease of a farm on the estate of his friend and patron, Patrick Miller of Dalswinton, Dumfriesshire, and next, to decide regarding the offer of a post in the Excise, procured by Graham of Fintry, near Dundee, a Commissioner of Excise for Scotland. Ellisland pleased him because of its picturesque situation in the valley of the Nith, and he closed the bargain. “You have chosen like a poet rather than a farmer,” his adviser, Cunningham, told him, as though foreseeing what must come. The Excise was purely a bread-and-butter addition.

But his real, his urgent business was by hook or by crook, to end the entanglement with Jean. The position was distressing; in certain aspects calamitous. The enthusiast, the laureate and cavalier of love had carried things with just a little too much *éclat*; and now in the crisis of his fortunes, as he drearily confessed, he was “damned with a choice of different species of error and misconduct,” a choice hazardous to honour and, it might well be, ruinous to happiness. Ah! the Sex, the dear, delusive, alluring, baffling, plaguing Sex, his joy and his bane, at present, unhappily, a good deal more bane than joy.

To the forlorn Jean, his return was as salvation to the lost; but in Edinburgh, Clarinda fretted in a misery of loneliness, conjecture, suspense, suspicion and jealousy. Not till he was gone did she own, even to herself, just what Sylvander meant to her. Because, amid distractions she could neither guess nor understand, he was dilatory in writing, she reproached him for neglect, remarking that she suffered “the cruellest pains” from hope deferred.

“You know,” she confessed, unable any longer to deny

the dictates of her heart, "I count all (Heaven excepted) but loss that I may win and keep you," a declaration that sent the blood throbbing to his heart. She tried to be rational; but could not help owning, "I always grow more foolish the farther I am from those I love; by and by, I suppose, I shall be insane altogether."

Poor Clarinda, he thought. Flattering, but in present circumstances most confoundedly embarrassing. The tragedy of it was that he was committed to both charmers, and (polygamy being unlawful even as an experiment) he must fail and brutally wound one or the other. The thought made honour reel. Of course he could cut the Gordian knot and be free. But that would be a villain's way out. Free! A free man smirched for ever with dishonour. And suppose the ill conditioned Armour again put the law in motion? For one dread moment he saw himself a fugitive once more, skulking from house to house, from place to place, this time with little chance of escape. Second thoughts, however, convinced him that the fear was baseless. James Armour had taken his revenge.

Fortunately, the amiable and compliant Jean could be easily managed. A little tact, a little finesse, a kiss, a fond, sweet promise of aid and reasonable redress would make her content, if not happy. She was not touched to fine issues. In her rather carnal composition, there was nothing of the poetess, nothing of the white Sappho-like flame which scorched even while it intoxicated. A creature of untutored instincts and red hot impulses, she loved and took love's risks, never recking the consequences. And when things went awry, she could be kissed and comforted and cajoled into smiles, like a child.

Clarinda was of another mould. Staking all on the sacredness of love, she demanded complete possession of her Sylvander. Aberrations might be condoned so long as they were aberrations, and not deliberate, premeditated disloyalties. He read her like a book. At the same time, he

remembered, with due effect, his own pride and prestige as a lover. Therefore he replied in true injured-lover style that he was stung by her reproach of unkindness. He could bear, he declared, eloquently, to be overtopped in anything else; but "in the tests of Generous love" he defied mankind. Besides—and here came the touch of the accomplished gallant and artist—was it not blasphemy against her own charms and his feelings to suppose one short fortnight could abate his passion? This, in truth, was making assurance doubly sure. For already, as a precautionary measure, he had written to her immediately on his arrival in Mauchline:

"I, this morning as I came home, called for a certain woman. I am disgusted with her—I cannot endure her. I, while my heart smote me for the profanity, tried to compare her with my Clarinda; 'twas setting the expiring glimmer of a farthing taper beside the cloudless glory of the meridian sun. *Here* was tasteless insipidity, vulgarity of soul and mercenary fawning; *there* polished good sense, Heaven-born genius, and the most generous, the most delicate, the most tender passion. I have done with her, and she with me."

After that could Clarinda have the shadow of a shade of doubt that Sylvander was wholly hers, the devoted lover loyally waiting till it pleased Providence to remove the wickedly obstructive McLehose?

In a somewhat different strain he informed Robert Ainslie:

"Jean, I found banished like a martyr—forlorn, destitute and friendless; all for the good old cause. I have reconciled her to her fate; I have reconciled her to her mother; I have taken her to a room; I have taken her to my arms; I have given her a mahogany bed; I have given her a guinea, and I have embraced her till she rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory." Followed a burst of ribaldry in the spirit of the "Merry Muses" unfit to print.

At this interesting point, it is essential to be precise with dates. The letter to Ainslie was dated the third of March 1788. On the same date, as recorded by Burns in his family Bible, and for the second time, Jean presented him with twins, both girls. The gods were kind, and, happily for themselves, poor unwanted waifs, they died almost as soon as they were born. The letter of protest, devotion and adoration to Clarinda was written four days later, that is on the seventh of March. Though a man cannot serve two masters, it may yet be possible for him to serve two mistresses. At any rate, Burns was making the gallant experiment.

From the timely and generous care of the Muirs, he took Jean to a hired room in Mauchline, almost within bow-shot of her father's house. About that room gossips instantly clustered, and buzzed like flies about a honey pot. Nor was gossiping all. Saunders Tait, tailor of Tarbolton, an old enemy and would-be rival of Rob Mossgiel in satire, celebrated the arrival of the twins, with suggestive details, in scurrilous doggerel which sent the whole countryside into fits of mocking laughter. What would Ranting Rob say or do now? Stung to the quick, Burns dashed off a retort in the style of the notorious "Reply to a Trimming Letter," read it over and tore it to fragments. No, it would not do. The satirist satirized found his mouth shut.

Of all his ills in that time of affliction, the hardest to bear, however, was the dumb, pitiful, haunting misery of his own folk at Mossgiel. Sympathise they dared not; condemn they would not. They could only look on, listen and suffer. Like himself they were proud; in pride they held up their heads; but sheer bitter shame often made their faces burn. What an enigma Robin was! How he astonished and perplexed, gladdened and distressed them! The great folk of Edinburgh made much of him, both as a man and a poet. But Edinburgh, with its chorus of applause,

was far off; Mauchline was close at hand, and Mauchline was seething with scandal.

"Never before have I seen Mauchline so avid," Gavin Hamilton confessed to him. "Not even when Daddy Auld and I were at each other's throats. It gloats over the chance of belittling and defaming what Edinburgh has honoured and acclaimed. The parish pump, my friend, puffed up with the pride of being—the parish pump."

"Oh!" said Burns, with a curl of the lip, "in hell, it is written, they deride the glories and felicities of Heaven."

"We do better than that," Gavin smiled grimly. "We have our own little hell most amply provided with real true-blue brimstone." Then with the freedom of a friend, he asked, "And Jean, poor girl, how is she?"

"Much comforted," replied Burns, in a meaning tone.

"That's good news. Has she expectations? What about making her an honest woman?"

Burns paused as if considering his answer.

"As to that you'd scarcely believe it, but contrary to my usual practice, I have been most prudent and cautious."

"Prudent and cautious. Yes, I admit that's rather unlike you. If it's not impertinent what particular turn are the unaccustomed virtues of prudence and caution taking?"

"Nothing from you can ever be impertinent," was the ready reply. "I'll tell you frankly. In the jargon of the market, my affairs, financial and amatory, are, as you may guess, a bit embarrassed. So taking counsel of necessity, I have sworn her never to attempt any claim on me as a husband, actual or potential, now or hereafter."

"That's drastic," said Gavin. "Well! she agreed?"

"Absolutely and unconditionally, like the good girl she is."

Gavin stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I am no preacher, Burns. God knows I have no right to be. But, as between friend and friend, I'll say this, if asked an opinion, my

answer would be, think twice there. The girl has trusted you. Besides she has attractions all her own."

"Haven't I owned it?" Burns made haste to agree. "Once she nearly drove me crazy, yes, stark crazy; and always I have found her a most delicious armful." And with that he changed the subject. There were matters he could not discuss even with Gavin Hamilton.

By the middle of March he was again in Edinburgh, dunning Creech, drinking a jovial glass with old companions, and renewing vows at the feet of Clarinda. He saw her often at her flat in General's Entry; and, as if "sweet and precious" visits were not enough, his passion overflowed into almost daily epistles, burning with the white heat of the adoring single-hearted lover.

One day it was: "Your hopes, your fears, your cares, my love, are mine. I will take you in my hand through the dreary wilds of this world and scare away the ravening bird or beast that would annoy you." The next it was: "Life, my Clarinda, is a weary, barren path and woe to him or her that ventures on it alone. For me, I have my dearest partner of my soul. Clarinda and I will make our pilgrimage together." In the event of absence, "Will you?" he asked. "Will you open with satisfaction and delight a letter from a man who loves you, who has always loved you, and who will love you to death and for ever? Oh! Clarinda, what do I owe to Heaven for blessing me with such a piece of exalted excellence as you!"

Abelard to his trusting Heloise was never more impassioned. And Clarinda, believing to the last jot and tittle as her heart wished to believe, trembled and wept with joy unspeakable. Again and again she read his letters, dwelling with nameless rapture on every tender word, every burning phrase. Such a man! Poet, chevalier, lover, all in one magical blend. Surely she was the most fortunate of women. In a delirium of passion, she had owned that she would risk all (Heaven excepted) to win and keep him. She had

won him, and, please God, she would keep him against the happy day, might it come soon, when the galling bond that bound her to another should be broken. On that Heavenly felicity she doted day and night. In the hidden background the Fates, spinning their everlasting web, must have grinned, were it only in pity for mortal delusion.

On Saturday, the twenty-second of March (again we must be precise in dates) the lovers kept their last tryst, for the present, in her flat. Clarinda presented Sylvander with a breast-pin containing a miniature of herself, a sweet augury of bliss to come; and Sylvander responded handsomely with a pair of drinking glasses to "The Fair Empress of the Poet's Soul," from which in his absence, she was to drink to "Thee and Me, Love." He also presented her with an elegantly bound copy of Young's "Night Thoughts," discreetly inscribed, since alien eyes might fall on it, not to Clarinda, but to Mrs. McLehose. Finally, with all the moving fervour of which he was master, he vowed afresh that for him she was the only woman in the world. Earth held no other like her, or if it did "in vain for him."

Within a week he was once more in Mauchline, and immediately the scandal-mongers were buzzing and stinging like a cloud of gnats. Did they madden him to action; did he wish to silence them at a stroke, or did honour and pity prevail? At any rate without warning there came a dramatic and amazing *volte-face*, which left friends and foes alike gaping; and shattered for ever the dream-castles he had reared with so much zeal in Edinburgh.

A week after his return, to wit, on the seventh of April, in the house of Gavin Hamilton, Justice of the Peace, he married Jean Armour.

PART III

The best of all we do and are great God forgive.

—*Euripides*

CHAPTER 1

TEN days later Sarah Nimmo called on her friend, Agnes McLehose, with the secret exhilarating sense of importance of one who brings sensational news. She was, however, in no haste to make her disclosure. It was not until they were in lively tête-à-tête over the tea-table that she remarked, as it were casually and incidentally:

"I suppose you'll have heard the news from Mauchline?"

"What news?" answered Clarinda, with an inward start of apprehension. "What's been happening there, Sarah?"

"I thought you'd have heard," said Sarah, taking a leisurely sip. "Well! the word is that your friend Mr. Burns is a married man."

Clarinda paused with the cup halfway to her lips, stared a second and set it down jerkily without drinking. The observant Sarah noted that she paled suddenly as from a staggering blow.

"That's news. Whom has he married?"

"Oh! that woman he was entangled with down there, what's her name? Jean Armour, isn't it? A free and easy kind of wench by all accounts." She tittered meaningly.

Clarinda swallowed something very hard. "Who—who told you that, Sarah?"

"Willie Nicol. You know how thick he is with Mr. Burns. He says it was quite unexpected."

Clarinda tried to smile; but every feature of her face was rigid as if frozen. The effort resolved itself into a piteous, galvanized grin.

"Do you believe it?"

"I am just telling you what Willie Nicol says." Sarah's tone was unemotional and studiously matter-of-fact. "He has no doubt about it." Then with a caustic little laugh

as though she had always suspected the worst. "You never can be up to men. They're that slippery and twisty, this today, that tomorrow and something else the day after."

Again Clarinda made a piteous effort to smile.

"Quite chameleon-like; only Mr. Burns may be different."

"As different, my dear, as two peas in a pod and as like as Sin and Satan. But there, what am I hawing about? It's nothing to us. You've made your market; and I never fash my head about men." She laughed crisply. "We can only hope he'll be happy, poor man. A poet! From what Willie Nicol says there's little enough poetry in Jeannie Armour. Now, if it was you, Agnes."

But Agnes, already in throes of torment, protested hotly.

"Don't, Sarah, please don't say things like that."

"Of course, of course, my dear," responded Sarah with a look of intelligence. "A respectable married woman with a family of her own must have no wandering thoughts of that sort, even if she is a poet herself. I only mentioned the thing at all thinking you'd be interested."

"It is very interesting," said Clarinda, striving desperately to crush down her tell-tale agitation.

Left to herself presently, a whirlpool of raging emotions, she tried to digest the overwhelming news. Sylvander married! Sylvander married—and to Jean Armour. No. No; it could not be. She would not believe it. Nicol was a liar, a venomous, vindictive liar, whose drink-sodden brain bred falsehood as rotten cheese bred maggots. Sylvander base, treacherous, callous. Never. As well say snow was black or that the Castle rock had melted in torrid heat.

She recalled their hours together, went over every treasured word and look, all fraught with truth, honour, candour, sincerity. And his letters. Leaping up and unlocking a drawer, she took out a packet daintily tied with blue ribbon. Tearing away the ribbon she began to read, the

breath stayed in her breast. If they did not mean devotion, complete and undivided, then language had no meaning. But they were true, of course they were true to the last passionate word and syllable. She would go to Nicol and make him eat his vile calumnies. She would go to him now, at once while her courage was hot.

Hastily re-tying the letters with a fresh ribbon she put them back in their place, locked the drawer and put the key in her pocket. That done she went into her bedroom to dress for the encounter which was to kill a diabolic lie. But a glance at herself in the glass brought a gasp of horror. She shrank back, panting. Go to Nicol with that face? It would be like an open confession. Nicol would just laugh in his brutal way and say, "Ha, ha, so that's how it is, is it?" She must wait. Tomorrow she would be more composed; better able to fight.

Then a new idea struck her. She must have proof of his falsehood and malice. But from whom? A moment she thought, as by lightning flashes. Peggy Chalmers, of course. Peggy was in Sylvander's confidence: besides she was a nice girl, a lady who might be depended on not to blab, for the visit must be a dead secret. First thing tomorrow morning then she would go to Peggy and prove Nicol a liar.

With the first sign of dawn she was up, unable any longer to bear the torment of bed. Though she had not slept a wink she felt no weariness, no langour. Her eyes had the brightness of fever; on each cheek-bone a hectic spot burned; her whole being was wound up to a nervous intensity of excitement which action alone could allay. And she would act with speed and decision. In a few hours the monstrous lie would be dead.

It was a relief when her maid-of-all-work, Janet McKelvie, arrived, puffing and blown by her climb from the abyss of the Grass Market under the Castle cliff. Janet was

elderly, stout, talkative and a widow with a fondness for strong waters.

"Thae braes," she panted, holding both her sides. "Thae braes. Why the forbears o' this toon o' Edinbury went and set it doon amang a hatter o' rocks and gulleys as if fowk could scammle like goats and foxes, Guid only kens." She wiped her dewy face with an air of martyrdom.

"Having a little merry-meeting last night, Janet?" asked her mistress, drawing sure inferences from Janet's symptoms.

"It's quick in the uptake ye are, Mem," replied Janet, nothing abashed. "Just a kind o' Penny Weddin', and no' sae muckle o' that either. This new stuff frae the Hielands taks the legs a bit, but its grand and comfortin' to the heart. Leeze me on drink. Ye ken wha says that."

Her mistress pretended to smile.

"Not to be taken too seriously, Janet. Poets don't always mean what they say."

"I'm thinkin' *he* means it," returned Janet, with conviction. "And 'deed, Mistress, a poor widdy woman wi' ae son a sodger and another a hostler and another in the riggin' o' a ship somewhere off Jamaica, forby a dochter merried on a sweep, needs a' the cheerin' up she can get."

"Well!" said Clarinda, feeling herself on perilous ground. "Have your breakfast and you'll feel better. When the boys are up and dressed I must go out. You'll take good care of them, Janet."

"As if they were my very born ain," replied Janet warmly. "Hae nae fear for them, Mem."

Presently when her Mistress went out she planted herself by a convenient window to watch.

"What flea's kittlin' her noo?" she thought. "Is it like to be her man, I wonner? Maybe he's commin' back till her: maybe he's getting tired o' his black harlots. If I had just five minutes alane wi' him he'd hear something to

warm him up. Men that run awa frae their wives and take up wi' the first pented huzzie they meet should be branded wi' hot irons."

Janet, whose matrimonial experiences had not been undiluted felicity, would have the law of husband and wife, as operative in Scotland, drastically amended.

Meanwhile Clarinda sped on her mission afire with hope, fear, and fierce determination. As the hour was still too early even for a casual call on a familiar friend she took a walk by the green slope of Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags. It was a lovely spring day, with the sun weaving gorgeous, iridescent tapestries from the eternal haze that gave Edinburgh its title of Auld Reekie. She breathed deeply, drinking in the sweet cool air in great draughts. To inhale it was like laving the hot beating brain in cold spring water.

On a rock overlooking Holyrood House she sat down.

Holyrood! the House of Kings, with its crowding memories of romance and tragedy, tragedy more than romance. Mary Stuart had lived and loved there, the tragic symbol of woman's fate. In imagination she saw the gay, beautiful girl with her splendid auburn hair and her lively French ways, flitting and tripping among the grey alleys below. And men, cruel men, had played battle-dore and shuttlecock with her for their own wicked, savage ends. Poor Mary! She sighed. Poor Clarinda.

Of a sudden she looked at her watch. Nearly eleven o'clock. With a half-choking sensation she rose and went off, unconsciously walking very fast. Soon she was back among streets and houses, revolving how she would broach her subject to Peggy Chalmers. Then in rounding a corner she came face to face with Peggy.

"Oh!" she cried, "Think of meeting you like this. I meant to look in, in passing, only I was afraid you might think it too early."

"Never too early for you," smiled Peggy in her good-natured way. "Come with me now."

They walked a minute side by side chatting; then with a mighty effort to still the beating of her heart, Clarinda asked:

"Have you heard the ridiculous story from Mauchline? They say Mr. Burns has married Jean Armour. Absurd, isn't it?"

"It is true," replied Peggy quietly. "Only this morning I had a letter from himself telling me. Yes, Jean Armour is now Mrs. Burns."

Clarinda could scarcely breathe. For one swift moment the world reeled and went black; but somehow—by some force of volition of which she was not aware, she recovered herself.

"How very queer," she said. "How very, very queer."

Back in the privacy of her own room she sat down desolately amid the wreck of dreams to realize, if she could, an impossible catastrophe. So it was all over. Sylvander was false, blackly, basely false. His flatteries, his passionate vows, his plighted honour that he made so much ado about, were so much deceit, signifying nothing. She had been duped, deceived, humiliated, wounded where wounds were sorest. It made her burn to think how freely she had laid bare her feelings. Doubtless he laughed in secret at her fatuity, her blind, credulous folly. Oh! the horror of it, the stark rankling horror. Perhaps this was God's way of punishing her for being a fool.

Out of the chaos of racked emotion one clear, comforting thought rose—she had kept her honour pure and undefiled. Thank God for that mercy, so unspeakably precious now. There were moments of deadly peril, for Sylvander was no Platonic lover; but even in his arms, and oh! in spite of everything it was Heaven to be there, religion was about her like a shielding power. In this crisis

it was worth all the world to have that sustaining sense of rectitude. Yet it proved a poor anodyne. Would nothing stop the throbbing fiery torture of heart and brain? Why were human beings endowed with the power of thought and feeling if in time of trouble it was to be a curse and not a blessing?

Then suddenly, as if the whole mental machinery were reversed with a jerk, there came a furious reaction; a wild rebound; and with it a fierce desire for vengeance. She would not suffer in silence; she would not. Why should she? She had been struck foully, cruelly; she would strike back. Leaping up, she got pen and paper and began to write in a bursting fury. It was no longer "My dearest Sylvander," it was the hostile and haughty "Sir."

"I have heard," she wrote, meaning her pen to be dipped in gall.

I have heard the news of your perfidy. I suppose you thought it fine manly sport to play on the credulity, or was it the vanity? of a woman. I burn with shame to think I ever heeded or believed your honeyed words and false candied sentiments, which I find quite worthy of a stage villain. Now that I am rudely awakened from a very silly dream I see and know you for what you are. I leave your own heart to supply the description. My wish is never to hear from you again, though if you had the slightest tincture of the honour to which you pretend you would hasten to own your despicable conduct.

Your wife, God pity her! would be charmed to read what you recently wrote to me concerning her. How perfectly entrancing you found her when you wrote me that description of her from Mauchline, or was that too just a piece of deception? Some day I may publish your letters; and then the world will see what a man of honour is Robert Burns who writes so nobly about that virtue.

I will not wish you ill, because that would be unchristian, and my religion, thank God, even you were not able to take from me; but I am not hypocrite enough to send congratulations.

Agnes Craig McLehose

To Mr. Robert Burns.

"There," she said straightening herself on a great breath. "There. Now for posting it at once."

The boiling resentment had found vent. She felt much better.

CHAPTER 2

IN PART of a small thatched cottage, facing, almost within touch of Nance Tinnock's change-house or tavern, Burns and Jean set up house-keeping. Their accommodation was a single, stone-floored, uncarpeted room, barely furnished, and provided with the customary box-bed, an insanitary abomination peculiar to Scotland. Burns viewed the mean, meagre *ensemble* a trifle wryly. After Edinburgh drawing-rooms and the luxury of the rich, Creech's for example, it seemed the very epitome of poverty.

"Not much to boast of, my Jeannie," he remarked. "A but without a ben and scrimpit at that. Never mind, it's a beginning and we are together at last, my love."

"We are together," breathed Jean in a glow of rapture. To be with him, to feel he was her own, her very own was all that mattered. Gratified love and a sense of safety irradiated everything. Besides she had never known the grandeur of the metropolis nor drunk of the bewitching wine of Circe which first enchants and then maddens and kills. She was Mrs. Robert Burns. Robert had chosen her, turning away from all the fine ladies who dangled expectantly about him. Wonderful. Wonderful beyond speech or thought.

He had scant leisure for honeymoon attentions, however. On every hand new ventures, new responsibilities engaged him. His Excise commission had come and he was taking lessons in gauging from James Findlay, Excise Officer of Tarbolton. More immediately important he had to make Ellisland fit for habitation, and stock and manage the farm.

His little blaze of glory had given him a taste for pleasure and idleness of a costly kind: he had wasted time and money. But "the giddy follies and varnished vices"

were past and done with. Henceforth, he would be sober, prudent, diligent, a model farmer, and, please God, a model husband. He had but to remember his own golden axiom, that "while the busy means are plied" reward will not be lacking.

Ellisland was a big problem. Fallen to decay it needed a new dwelling-house, new steading and general rehabilitation. As a grant in aid his landlord and friend, Patrick Miller, furnished funds to the extent of £300. The rest lay with himself; and in effect he had to be his own architect, his own director of works, his own master-mason, even his own hodman. He set about his novel task with the enthusiasm and energy of one who, swimming clear of a sea of troubles, rises to his life's work with new purpose and a whetted ambition. His ardour, his endurance, his giant strength amazed and not seldom shamed his fellow-workers. In hoisting heavy stones, heaving up timber, or mixing mortar not one of them was his match.

"See at him," they would cry, "just see at him. He puts his hand to a stane that two o' us could hardly lift and up it goes as licht-like as a lintie."

"He's a meeracle," they said among themselves.

"Think o' him layin' on ye in anger. And him a poet."

They had a dim idea, got they could not tell how or where, that poets were poor pitiful creatures with scarcely pith enough to sup porridge and certain to be bowled over by an extra thimbleful of whiskey. Burns was a man among men. Strange that those brawny arms should ever be devoted to the effeminate pastime of writing idle rhymes.

During the strenuous operations of home-making he lodged with the outgoing tenants, David Cullie and his wife, Nance, at the Isle, some ten minutes' walk down Nithside from the scene of work. The Isle, poetically so named, was the mouldered keep of a feudal fortress; the home of the Cullies, a hut under its dank ivied crumbling

walls, "pervious to every blast that blew and every shower that fell." They were a pious couple who, since it was God's will they should make an utter failure of farming, turned with the greater zeal to the duties (and the consolations) of religion. The reputation of their lodger, aflame over the whole countryside or ever he appeared, seriously alarmed them. Later they heard ungodly enthusiasts recite with ungodly relish "Holy Willie's Prayer," "The Holy Fair," "Death and Dr. Hornbook," and other Satanic blasphemies and were aghast. Wickedly flying in the face of his Maker: heinous beyond words. And on their part did they not run the risk of incurring Divine Wrath (to say nothing of their minister's) by harbouring such a sinner even for the sorely needed cash? Then one day Mrs. Cullie had a celestial revelation.

"Oh! Dauvit," she cried, after a most spiritual, most edifying talk with the arch heretic and scoffer. "Hoo we've been wrangin' that poor man. I think he has mair o' the Bible on his tongue than Mr. Inglis himsel'," the Scripture-soaked Inglis being their priceless anti-Burgher minister. The discovery fired her with an instant desire for conversion. The man who overflowed with Bible knowledge, who quoted Moses and the Prophets with ready familiarity, could not be wholly past redemption. Burns sighed dolefully.

"Did ever poor sinner endure so much?" he reported privily. "I fairly batten on good advice. Heigh ho!"

Slavish toil, lenten fare, leaky smoky lodgings and the machinations of a devout, reforming landlady did not make for jollity. His first gloomy judgment on Nithsdale was that, "Nothing flourishes here in any degree of perfection except stupidity and canting," while as to poetry, his bucolic neighbours, for most part, had "as much idea of a rhinoceros as of a poet." One resource, however, he had of which even stupidity and canting could not rob him—the companionship of his Muse. In the long twi-

lights he took solitary, inspiring walks by the picturesque Nith and among the secluded beauties of Friars' Carse, a refuge made available by the courtesy of the owner, Captain Robert Riddel. Captain Riddel, an antiquary of poetic tastes, had built himself a summer-house or *châlet* in a bosky corner of the grounds. Burns was presented with a key to be used at pleasure; and in that romantic seclusion, with honeymoon thoughts of Jean, he composed his two impassioned lyrics, "O' a' the airts the wind can Blaw," and the still more fervent:

O! were I on Parnassus Hill,
Or had of Helicon my fill,
That I might catch poetic skill
To sing how dear I love thee.

Well he knew that Jean had as much notion of Parnassus or Helicon as of the motions and construction of the solar system: but she would be pleased to be remembered in this characteristic fashion. Besides, poor girl, she needed comforting.

The tributes were delivered in person; for he went often to and fro between Ellisland and Mauchline, making the lean, raw-boned Jenny Geddes yet leaner, more raw-boned. The journey was forty miles, usually done against time and without halt. It was hard riding; but Jenny, though never meant for a prize list, was the hardiest, most spirited of roadsters.

Jean was in ecstasy. The poetic quality of the songs was nothing; but the sentiment, ah! that was what made the heart leap.

"Ye didna forget, and you wi' so much to do," she said, her eyes moist and shining.

He put an arm about her waist and kissed her.

"Forget! Forget the bonnie bird I'm so busy building a nest for. That's likely."

She threw her arms about his neck and for a full minute held him in a breathless embrace.

Then, the first delirious rapture a little abated, she suddenly remembered, and with a "I've something for you," put Clarinda's letter into his hand. "It went to Mossgiel," she told him. "Agnes brought it down yesterday."

"From somebody in Edinburgh. No need bothering with it now," he remarked carelessly, stuffing it into his pocket.

And Jean, simmering with her own divine happiness, asked no questions.

CHAPTER 3

NOT till next day as he rode back to Ellisland did Burns pluck up courage to open the crumpled letter in his pocket so secretly kept from Jean. That Clarinda had somehow heard of his marriage he easily guessed. She would be terribly cut, poor soul. Thinking of the passionate scenes between them he pictured her in a passion of tears, bewailing her lost love. Instead she was scornful, sarcastic, stinging, every word a distilled acid, angrily injected on a needle point to make sure of its going home. Never before had a woman turned on him in this fashion. Villain indeed! Oh! ho! And from Clarinda. For a moment he felt as if steeped in boiling pitch. This, then, was what came of being "damned with a choice only of different species of error and misconduct." Error, misconduct. Lord! how the two words summed up his troubled, tempestuous career. A villain. Clarinda in a tempest of rage, calling him a villain.

That she had cause for anger he did not attempt to deny, even to himself. It was never his way to deny the truth. The unfortunate thing was that being a woman, intent on the one thing dear to a woman's heart, she could not understand his damnable entanglements nor the plight into which they thrust him. For that matter he did not understand himself till there came the peremptory call to his manhood and he was forced to decide and act. In that final decision he really seemed to have as little volition as a criminal going to execution. A stern, imperative voice commanded, "Marry your Jean." And he married her. What else could he do?

Clarinda, of course, cherished fond hopes, and he, blind to all but the bliss of the passing moment, lured her on with ravishing pictures of an ideal future together. To that

extent he was to blame. But then the felicity described with so many vows of constancy was contingent on the exit of a husband who obstinately persisted in barring the way and might continue to bar it till hope, if not love, should be dead and gone. She ought to remember that. Because she forgot it, and because he obeyed the dictates of honour he was written down a villain. It was too much. She had gone too far. With a fiery spasm he thrust the letter back into his pocket, tightened the reins with a jerk and Jenny Geddes, ever obedient to a touch, broke into a smart trot. Next minute the spurs were in her sides, and she was straining in a furious gallop as though her master rode for life and death. She reached Ellisland blowing hoarsely and dripping foam. At sight of her white heaving flanks and drooping head his heart smote him.

"I have been unkind to you, my willing one," he said remorsefully, stroking her wet neck. "The old, old story of the innocent suffering for the guilty. Forgive me. Ah! Jenny, Jenny you have your grievances: but, my dear, be glad you're not a man."

With a handful of clean dry straw he wiped away the sweat and grime; then, when cool enough, she had a drink of pure well water, generously seasoned with oat meal, followed by a double feed of oats. He felt his pulses beat more equably. The cordial of the late spring air, the rapid movement, the sense of unjust censure, and, more than all, the sleepless pride and defiance which were an inherent part of Robert Burns in some measure restored his equanimity.

But that evening Clarinda's letter went down the Nith in fragments, very tiny fragments, lest anyone should find and read. What was he expected to do? Leave a woman in the lurch, a woman, whose only fault was loving him regardless of consequences? Never, never, while he had breath to draw.

Moreover, and here was a vitally practical point, it was

high time to settle down, to be prudent and gather gear, even like the prosaic, stodgy sons of Mammon at whom he jeered and laughed. Illicit roaming had its delights: it had also (as experience proved) its perils and embarrassments which the delights too seldom counterbalanced. As to satire, it might be riotous fun to stick one's claws in Pharisees, to plant darts in the quivering flesh of opponents, to lash bigotry and make humbug ridiculous, but wisdom suggested better ways of fattening the lean purse. What was it that he once wrote?

To catch dame fortune's golden smile,
Assiduous wait upon her.

There was the grand secret, the whole philosophy of worldly success in a couplet. His own too. By Jupiter, how wise he could be when he took thought.

Thus fortified in the opinion he needs must hold he proceeded to explain to various correspondents why he, the apostle of unfettered love, should suddenly have chosen the fetters of wedlock. Naturally, his dramatic *volte-face* would surprise his friends; there was danger too that they might misconstrue his surrender to the conventional. Accordingly to his latest patroness, Mrs. Dunlop, it was:

"I found a once much-loved and still much-loved, female literally and truly cast out to the mercy of the naked elements. Her happiness or misery was in my hands, and who could trifle with such a deposit?"

And conveniently forgetting, or ignoring, what he had so recently written to Clarinda, he added the handsome testimonial that Jean had "the most placid good nature and sweetness of disposition, a warm heart, gratefully devoted with all its powers to love me, vigorous health and sprightly cheerfulness, set off to the best advantage by a more than common handsome figure." What though she lacked superfine tastes and patrician graces, or had "Never read a page but the Scriptures of the Old and New Testa-

ments nor danced in a brighter assembly than a Penny Pay Wedding?" He could fancy a more agreeable companion for the journey of life, "but upon my honour," he declared gallantly, "I have never met the individual instance."

In fine Asiatic style he informed another correspondent that he had joined "that venerable corps, who are, without metaphor, the fathers of posterity, the benefactors of all coming generations, the editors of spiritual Nature and the authors of Immortal Being."

Where now was Mary? Where Clarinda? In the surge and whirl of this new found sentiment were they forgotten? Not for a moment. The former it was possible to forget when he forgot all earthly things. Ere long the latter was to wring from him the piteous cry which severed heart-broken lovers were to make their own for all time. The day was coming; was not far distant when he was to see all his vaunted, painfully built up happiness dissolve and disappear like snow-wreaths in thaw.

Meantime one thing particularly pleased and animated him. By the strictest moral code of his time his good name was restored. He was a respectable married man; Jean was an honest woman, as honest, as chaste, as the primmest dame among them. No more jeering and pointing the finger of scorn. True, Daddy Auld and his gang had still their little rod in pickle. But the use of it to him was now a mere formality, an official act granting his status as a good, proper, reputable citizen.

And Jean, breathing and throbbing as with a bliss almost too great to be borne, was, as he said, all tenderness, devotion, wonder, and a passion to please and keep her man. Now that he was a farmer, and she a farmer's wife she strove by every atom of her power to qualify for the position. When her husband (Oh! the Divine Melody of that word!) was absent at Ellisland she tramped out daily to Mossiel to learn the business of milking, butter and

cheese-making, domestic science and general housewifery. It would please *him* to see her devoted and efficient.

"Oh! Robert," she would tell him gleefully on his flying visits to Mauchline, "I have made butter (or cheese) all by myself, and your mother says it is as good as her own—almost."

"Splendid, my love, splendid," he would cry, kissing her for encouragement. "The very thing for Ellisland. In my mind's eye I see a flourishing dairy managed by you. It's a fat, grazing country over there, Jeannie; you and I will be favourites with fortune yet."

"It would be lovely," she cooed. "I am glad I can help, Robert." (At his request she called him "Robert." Someone else in the vanished past called him "Robin," and he did not wish Jean to revive distracting thoughts.)

To Mossgiel she went as one of the family. At first Robert's sisters were inclined to sniff and look askance; but his mother gently intervened.

"She is Robert's wife and one of ourselves," she told them. "Do to her as you would be done by." To himself in a confidential moment she said quietly:

"I am glad, dearie, Jean worships the ground you walk on. Be kind to her, my dear, be kind. The kind husband makes the good wife."

For answer he caught her in his arms, as in the old happy days.

"Mother, that little speech is worth ten thousand sermons. God's blessing on you."

"And on you too, dearie, on you too. Love and obey Him and all other things will be added unto you. There's His word for that. But losh! ye needna crush the very breath oot o' me. There, awa' to yer Jean. She's like a hen on a hot griddle every moment she's kept frae ye. And hurry up wi' Ellisland," she added, smiling at him through a wavering mist. "I'm fair wearyin' for the hoose-warmin' and bringin' hame the bride."

She would not criticize, neither would she preach: but that night, alone in her little room she prayed:

"The Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His Countenance upon thee and give thee peace."

Peace above all, peace to the perturbed spirit, the peace that passeth all understanding. It was Somebody's prayer for his loved ones: it was what his and her marvellous son needed most, just the divine, all sufficing blessing of peace.

And as though the eyes of love read the inmost secrets of his heart, almost as she prayed that son was asking himself if peace, real peace, was ever to be his again? In his hut near Ellisland he was making confession in a journal meant for his own eye alone.

"I am such a coward in life, so tired of the service that I could almost at any time, like Milton's Adam, gladly lay me in my mother's lap and be at peace."

Peace again, surcease of the fever called living. Nine and twenty, a month old bridegroom and already weary of all things under the sun. Hope. Happiness. Were they to be always a Will-o-the-Wisp, a beautiful mirage luring on and on and for ever evading, for ever mocking, pursuit?

That was the black-blooded, hypochondriacal Burns, the victim of "a diseased nervous system" an adverse fate and some other things superadded. But there was another Burns, the Burns of vaulting ambitions and a resolute will, who refused to dip the flag to despondency. This was the Burns who showed himself to his neighbours at Ellisland; with them he was ever blithe, ever ready for a crack, a jest and a dram; and, to their surprise, he was proving himself a stickler in driving a bargain.

"Dod he's a sharp ane," was the Nithsdale verdict. "Ye'll hae to get up early the day ye get owre him." In rural Nithsdale praise could go no farther. And he was working like a Trojan. At Ellisland "a house a-building and farm-enclosures and improvements to tend"; at

Mauchline "a new—not so much indeed, a new, as a young wife," these things kept hands and brain busy.

Meanwhile the shotted guns of Daddy Auld and the Kirk Session were kept ready for the final round; and, it may be supposed, were discharged with whole-hearted gusto. This official entry in the Session book indicates the result:

1788. Aug. 5. Sess. Con.—Compeared Robert Burns with Jean Armour, his alledged Spouse. They both acknowledged their irregular marriage, and their sorrow for that irregularity; and desiring that the Session will take such steps as seem to them proper in order to the solemn confirmation of the said marriage.

The Session, taking this affair under their consideration, agree that they both be rebuked for this acknowledged irregularity and that they be taken solemnly engaged to adhere faithfully to one another as husband and wife all the days of their life.

In regard the Session have a title in Law to some fine for behoof of the Poor they agree to refer to Mr. Burns his own generosity.

The above sentence was accordingly executed, and the Session absolved the said parties from any scandal on this acct.

William Auld, Mod:

Robt. Burns
Jean Armour

Robert signed for Jean, who had not yet learned to write; and gave a guinea note for the poor. When the ordeal was over he kissed her fervently.

"So that's that, my Jeannie. Come, your fairin' with the lave."

It was fair-day in Mauchline and the town was *en fete*; but Jean was to have more than Mauchline could supply. That night he despatched an order to a Glasgow silk-mercator for "15 yards black lutestring silk" to make her a new dress. It was to be the finest in the town.

CHAPTER 4

CLARINDA had in effect forbidden Sylvander to write to her any more, but in her heart she fervently hoped he would. Even his anger would be in some sort a solace in her purgatory of silence. It would at least dispel the harrowing sense of neglect. But the days and the weeks passed without bringing a word. He had forgotten her; nay, more, he was deliberately ignoring her—after all his vows. She was brooding thus when one day, near the end of November, in listlessly turning over her bi-weekly newspaper, the *Edinburgh Advertiser*, usually a dull sheet, her eye lighted on this semi-jocular note:

“Burns, the Ayrshire Bard, is now enjoying the sweets of retirement at his farm. Burns, in thus retiring, has acted wisely. Stephen Duck, the poetical Thresher, by his ill-advised patrons, was made a Parson, became insane, and, with his own hands ended his life. Burns, with propriety, has resumed the *flail*: but we hope he has not thrown away the *Quill*.”

Enjoying the sweets of retirement! Oh! doubtless basking in the sunshine of unbroken love—as—as though she did not exist. And with whom was he in that heavenly state? With that Jean, that stupid, illiterate, soiled piece of goods of whom he had spoken and written with so fine an air of contempt. The—the shameless deceiver.

In an access of rage she threw the offending paper on the floor and stamped on it; not content with that she kicked it, a trampled torn rag, into a corner. What business had the damn thing to come tormenting her? Enjoying the sweets of retirement! very likely cooing and caressing his shop-soiled beauty. Very beautiful. Very, very beautiful. Oh! the falsity of man.

Of a sudden she paused in her fury. What did all this

violence of rage mean? Jealousy—pure insurgent jealousy, a raving envy of one who possessed what she would give anything short of her soul to have. That was the blunt truth. So in spite of her pride and his perfidy Sylvander still had power to hurt her. She put a hand to her head to ease a blinding pain.

“Oh! Sylvander, Sylvander!” she cried. “Oh, Sylvander, how could you! how could you?”

Of his recent movements she knew nothing, having cut herself off from all sources of information. Willie Nicol, Margaret Chalmers, Creech, or his assistant, Peter Hill, and others, could have enlightened her. But she avoided all who knew him or might report his doings as though they were plague spots. Even Sarah Nimmo was temporarily taboo.

“I never want to hear his name or see his face again,” she had told herself, with set teeth. Now, on a whirling revulsion which she was powerless to control, an instant overwhelming desire to know came upon her. Picking up the paper almost tenderly, she smoothed it out with shaking fingers and read the note again, all her pulses stayed.

She must have tidings of him. It would be torture perhaps; but better the torture of knowing than the torture of guessing and moping in an anguish of speculation.

She would write to him, not in the bitter strain of her former letter, but quietly, gently: even some of the old terms of endearment would not be out of place. Accordingly, in a beating tumult, she sat down and wrote. Surely Sylvander had not forgotten his Clarinda. She tried to indicate (Oh! how brutally obstinate and stupid words could be!) that her previous letter was more acid than she intended. Let him forget it and think only of the Clarinda with whom, but the other day, he was so happy.

But when the letter was written, so shakily she could scarcely read it herself, it was torn up. No, no, it would not

do. Sylvander would only laugh and preen himself on his conquest.

What then? To which the cold callous voice of common sense answered curtly. "Cut him out of your heart. Forget him. Even as he has forgotten you." Sound good sense, no doubt; but oh! the surgery. And was it really possible that he had forgotten her? Sylvander forget Clarinda! If that were true then Truth itself was false and Love most certainly a tragic delusion.

New Year came, when Scotland with one accord gives itself to the festive spirit of "Surely you'll be your pint stoup and surely I'll be mine." Sarah Nimmo, marvelling and very curious what had become of Agnes McLehose, called at General's Entry with wishes for many happy returns, and a Scotch bun of her own making, a black and fearful delicacy of which an ostrich might well die in the agonies of indigestion. In recent weeks she had made two attempts to see her friend Agnes and had failed. The third attempt succeeded; for Sarah, once roused to action, was a woman of grim resolution.

"So I have caught you at last," was her boisterous greeting. "Folk have been wondering if you had put on the veil and taken yourself off to a Nunnery."

"I might do worse, mightn't I?" answered Agnes with a smile which scarcely concealed her embarrassment.

"Ay," laughed Sarah. "Run off with a man for instance, I was once near doing it mysel'. Touch and go I can tell you. But that's an old story. Young and daft, young and daft. Dearie me, to think o't. He was good-looking, and had a tongue of honey; but just in the nick of time something whispered it wasn't me he wanted; it was something else. So the dear little plan came to nothing, and here I am."

"In maiden meditation fancy free," said Agnes, opportunely remembering her Shakespeare. "But bless me, what am I thinking of? Sit down, Sarah dear, sit down."

"It was my intention, Agnes," returned Sarah, beaming benevolently.

With due ceremony she presented her gift, a generous one in size and guaranteed in quality. That done she selected the largest, softest chair in the room, deposited her spacious person in it, and adjusted her stiff silk gown, her Sunday best in honour of the occasion. In those solid days silk gowns were so robust that when set up they stood by themselves, and when the wearer sat down had to be taken in fold upon fold like the reefing of a sail.

"You'll have tea, dear," said Agnes, bustling about, partly in glad hospitality, partly to recover her self-possession.

"That too was my intention," replied Sarah genially. "It is real refreshin', as the girl said when her backward sweetheart kissed her."

She was in proper New-Year mood, rustling her silk, chuckling over her own pleasantries, and all the while deftly playing up to draw Agnes.

"You haven't told me where and why you have been hiding yourself," she remarked presently, as they sat opposite each other at the tea-table.

"Willie" (her boy) "hasn't been very well," Agnes answered, a trifle haltingly.

"Poor wee lamb, I know he's delicate," said Sarah in her most sympathetic tones. "And of course you've been nursing him. It's made you a bit peaky, now that I see you in the light; and I declare you're losing your fine colour. That's what it is to have children."

"I wouldn't be without my boys for all the world," said Agnes, the colour flooding her face.

"There," cried Sarah. "You're rosy enough now. Ah! weel, ah! weel, as the man said somebody maun hae bairns to keep the world goin'. And yours are bonnie boys, Agnes, bonnie boys, God bless them. Some day, I suppose, they'll be breaking hearts like the rest of the men. It's

their nature, poor dears. As the Bible very truly says, we're fearfully and wonderfully made. But there, on New Year's Day we won't be worrying ourselves about that."

Accordingly they talked of other things—who was married, who should be married (Sarah had all particulars), who was sitting in the seat of Fashion now that Her Grace of Gordon had abdicated, who was in trouble with the City Guard, and the latest New Light Sermon that made light of hell and treated the devil as a joke. Then by some subtle operation of the principle of association Sarah asked abruptly:

"By the way, what's the news of your friend, Mr. Burns? How is he?"

"I don't know."

Sarah arched an eyebrow, as though to say, "Ho ho! You don't know, eh?"

"Oh! I thought you'd be sure to know, and you such friends. It was in my mind he'd be writing to you."

"Not a word. Why should he?"

Ignoring the question Sarah remarked jocularly.

"I know what he's up to. A surprise, that's his little game. Willie Nicol tells me he's to be back in Edinburgh soon, and he wants to pop in and take you unawares. He's a sly one."

For one ghastly moment Agnes had the sensation of being suddenly frozen, but by a miracle of will-power she kept her self-control. She even smiled.

"I don't think it's likely."

This time Sarah's eyebrow went up with a jerk.

"Not likely. You don't mean to say you've gone and quarrelled?"

"Quarrelled! Why should we quarrel?"

"You know best, Agnes. But you *were* such friends. And he admired you so tremendously. Poets both and all that. I thought poets could hardly help coming together like—like steel and magnet."

Agnes managed to intimate that in this instance the steel and magnet principle did not apply. Of course she admired him as a poet with all her heart; his genius was wonderful: but, well! their courses were divergent; that was all.

Sarah went off, full of her own shrewd thoughts. "What's the kick-up now?" she mused. "I jalouse there was more in Agnes's mind than she let out. Not just as frank as a crony might or should be. It cannot surely be Burns's marriage that's in the background."

The situation was decidedly piquant and to add to its piquancy she carefully let it be known that her friend Mrs. Agnes McLehose was done with Mr. Robert Burns. Why, she did not say: she just stated the fact and looked wise.

Burns came to get a little more of his own from the esurient Creech, were that possible, and was duly informed of the attitude of his old friend Mrs. McLehose, with particulars that sent the blood hot and stinging to his face. After chastising Creech he meant to call on Clarinda: but she would not, so he was told, so much as let her eyes rest on him, was even determined to avoid her window lest by any chance she should see him passing. So he came and went without a glimpse of her. As he rode southward he hummed blithely a snatch of his own song:

Shall I like a fool? quoth he
For a haughty hizzie dee?
She can gae to—France, for me.
Ha, ha, the wooin' o't.

All the same his anger and, still more, his pride were blazing furiously.

CHAPTER 5

WHILE Sarah Nimmo nursed (and pushed) her curiosity in Edinburgh, Burns was expatiating with pious eloquence to Mrs. Dunlop, a lachrymose, lugubrious person, on God, the Soul, Immortality, the Bible, and that "foolish, headstrong, credulous, unthinking mob," Mankind. And since the satirist was not to be suppressed even in moments of high philosophy and devotional ardour, he added a reverential "Address to Dulness."

O! Dulness, portion of the truly blest
Calm sheltered haven of eternal rest.

As usual, the satire was an expression of genuine personal feeling. Beyond doubt Dulness, with its twin brother Arrogance, possessed the Earth and the fulness thereof. He looked round and beheld Dulness, like an owlish deity, occupying all the chief seats. Everywhere "the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes." Slaves toiling and groaning and sweating "half mad, half fed, half sarkit," too often not even half fed or half sarkit, while their lords and masters rioted in every species of pleasure, luxury, and dissipation. Did God bestow brains in irony, just to show how worthless they were in the great race for place and pelf? The thought struck home with piercing force.

In five and twenty days he, Robert Burns, would be thirty, and despite a passing smile from Fortune, the taste of Dead Sea fruit was already bitter in his mouth.

For one thing he had just made a disquieting discovery. Ellisland, so picturesquely situated on a picturesque river, might be a poet's paradise; but it was far from being a farmer's Eden. For all needs and contingencies he had

some £200 in hand. Were his own selfish interest his sole concern that sum might be doubled to bridge the lean years. But half his little capital had gone to the Mossiel folk, and to call in the loan now would leave them penniless. That was not to be thought of, not if he had to tighten his belt at dinner time and pretend he had dined.

But others with yet tenderer, more intimate claims were now dependent upon him. Jean was at Ellisland, bringing, as it seemed, an avalanche of new cares and responsibilities. He looked into the future, and the future, was he a coward? made him afraid. Imagination, which makes the poet, unnerved the man, multiplying difficulties while it beat down courage and faith. Like a later poet, he made anew the ancient discovery:

The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
Is not to fancy what were fair in life,
Provided it could be; but finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means—a very different thing.

Up to our means. Ay, there was the rub; for the means were so pitiful. Mouths to feed, bodies to clothe and a certain appearance to be kept up, while the devil of necessity drove the remorseless whip. So it was the practical, disillusioned man, the husband and father, painfully devising ways and means, who turned half desperately to the Excise. His genteel friends sniffed disdainfully at the choice. A gauger! Surely, surely he would not so demean himself; They would do this and that and t'other thing rather than hunt smugglers and harry poor old ale-wives trying to turn an honest penny on the sly.

Nor in reality was the scheme much to his own liking. Little his critics guessed what it cost him to crush down his pride and openly seize the chance of that supplementary resource. But the problem was urgent, and it was for him, not for genteel critics and onlookers. He did not deny that there was "a certain stigma affixed to the

character of an Excise Officer." But then, he would not borrow honour from his calling. "I would much rather have it said that my profession borrowed credit from me." In the issue it borrowed everlasting fame. A rare thing happened. For once the man was greater, infinitely greater, than his office.

He thought of his patrons, lately so profuse of flattery and fine sentiments. For a little while he had allowed himself to be buoyed up by the hope of what their influence and goodwill would do for him. Vain fancy. In the pinch of fortune they were broken reeds. He recalled Johnson's smashing retort to Chesterfield. Brave old Samuel, a hero to the core, an avatar to all who valued the priceless spirit of Independence. Alas, however, the Chesterfields were still—Chesterfields. They let you struggle for your life, and if you managed to save yourself stepped in magnificently and encumbered you with help. Let them go. There was but one way—to do without their patronage. He would imitate Johnson and be damned to them.

Still the old galling reflection recurred. A little appreciation, a little encouragement, a little timely aid, what might they not do for a struggler? Patronage was rampant and sinecures abounded: but the sinecures were all for sycophants—the supple, servile, grovelling, politic gentry who knew how to fawn on titled knaves and crook the knee to blockheads in power with favours to bestow. He, God help him, had never learned the remunerative art of sycophancy, nor the invaluable trick of wire-pulling. So there was no sinecure, no snuggery for him and his gipsy Muse. Even the lowly post of Exciseman was not obtained without a wrench of pride. Thus to Commissioner Graham he wrote:

"You, sir, have the power to bless. I have told you my situation. If asking anything less could possibly have done I would not have asked so much. I shudder at my own *hardiesse*. Forgive me, sir." He added frankly that

in making the request he did violence to his own feelings. Fortunately, Mr. Graham was a man of sense, discernment, and humanity. He did what was necessary with his fellow commissioners, and Burns became an Exciseman at a salary of £50 per annum. He reckoned expenses at £12 leaving £38 nett. It seemed an escape from Purgatory.

Stress of circumstances pushed thoughts of Clarinda to the dim back of his mind; at times he even forgot her; but not for a moment did she forget him. One bright March day as he was striding over ploughed lea sowing oats from a bed-sheet fastened about his neck, he was hailed with a loud "halloo" from the highway. A neighbouring farmer, having business in Dumfries, had called at the Post Office, found there a letter for Burns and undertook to deliver it in passing.

"Some o' yer lady friends in Edinburgh speirin' after ye," he called jocosely from his gig, as Burns, divested of his sowing-sheet, approached. At a glance Burns recognized the handwriting. So she was on his track again. With a studiously careless air he put the letter in his pocket. He might read it at leisure or he might tear it up unread.

"And hoo's a' wi' ye, Ellisland?" enquired his friendly neighbour.

"As you see," was the smiling answer. "Sowing in the faith of being one day able to reap." The other grinned.

"Ay, we're an unco trustfu' folk, us fairmers, for a' Providence gies us the go-by whiles. That land o' yours needs a deal o' labourin' and feedin', I'm thinkin'. Auld Dauvit Cullie was grand at the prayin' but kind o' slack wi' the plewin' and manurin'."

"Not by prayer and fasting does a man get good crops," said Burns with a twinkle. The other guffawed.

"Not by prayer and fastin'. Dod, that's a guid ane. Not by prayer and fastin'. I'll hae to tell the meenister.

He'll be doon on ye. But faith it's a guid ane, and you a poet. And that minds me, hoo's yer Muse, as ye ca' her, gettin' along?"

"Like a hirplin, spavined, forjeskit cuddy," replied Burns, dropping for politeness' sake into the vernacular.

There came another resounding laugh.

"Ay, that's likely, mighty likely, wi' the hale countryside clean daft about yer songs and things. Ilka lad and lass tirlin' them aff like A.B.C., far glibber, let me tell ye, than their carritch (catechism). Ye've gotten the gift, Ellisland, ye've gotten the gift. I couldna' dae't."

Burns bowed becomingly.

"It's the truth I'm tellin' ye. The other nicht I was readin' 'Scotch Drink.' It looked easy enough, so says I to mesel', Dod I'll hae a try. Wha kens? maybe I'm a poet withoot kennin' it. So at it I goes—wi' twa good glesses on board min' ye, or fegs, it micht be three." He paused to laugh. "Weel, sir, after sair wrestlin' I got to the word 'Whiskey,' and there I stuck like a horse in a bog. Scratch my pow as I micht deil a rhyme would come. Noo, wi' you the words come skelpin' rank and file, as ye say yersel'. Ye've gotten the gift, nae doot o' that. But losh! man ye keep yersel to yersel, as if yer neeghbourers were'na good enough for ye."

"I'll have no libel on my neigbours," said Burns warmly.

"That's comfortin'. Weel! Come owre-by to my bit biggin' and we'se hae a crack and a dram. Man, I like fine to hear ye talkin'."

Burns smiled his acknowledgment a trifle dryly.

"First free moment I'm yours for that crack and dram. I know the stuff will be good."

He finished his sowing. Then in a quiet spot by a dyke-side he broke the seal and read Clarinda's letter.

CHAPTER 6

CLARINDA knew a great deal about Jean: but Jean knew little or nothing about Clarinda. Burns had casually mentioned Mrs. McLehose as a poetess and fine lady he met in Edinburgh, a remarkable and interesting person by reason of her gifts. More he did not choose to tell. No use marring one woman's felicity by describing the attractions of another. He had married Jean, "a marriage as random as blind man's buff," he candidly confessed. But the thing being done he prudently resolved to make the best of the bargain.

He was glad to get this second letter from Clarinda. Though not written in the old rapturous style (he could never hope for that again), it nevertheless breathed a mood of remorse, penitence and longing, very sweet and touching.

Certainly her tone was much changed. Perhaps she had written too impetuously before, said more than she should or meant. Why did people so often hurt the one they loved most? She was upset and allowed her feelings to run away with her—he knew why. If she did not care—but she could never, never pretend to be indifferent. Let him forget her little splutter of bitterness and think only of the old Clarinda as she thought of the old Sylvander. And with feminine inconsistency she upbraided him for making no attempt to see her during his recent visit to Edinburgh. How could he be so unkind? Let him write; let him scold if he liked, only let him write.

"The lover's pinch that hurts and is desired," quoth Sylvander to himself.

He wrote forthwith: but declined to plead guilty to charges which still rankled.

"You will pardon me, Madam," he told her, with a

touch of the hauteur which was part of the real Burns, "if I do not carry my complaisance so far as humbly to acquiesce in the name of *villain* merely out of compliment to your opinion, much as I esteem your judgment and value your worth." At the period alluded to he "was not under the smallest moral tie to Mrs. Burns," nor could he then know "all the powerful circumstances that omnipotent necessity was busy laying in wait" for him. Then, with a master-stroke he appealed to the past and her own knowledge of facts.

"When you have called over the scenes which have passed between us, you will survey the conduct of an honest man struggling with temptations, the most powerful that ever beset humanity, and preserving untainted honour in situations where the austere virtue would have forgiven a fall; situations that I will dare to say, not a single individual of all his kind, even with half his sensibility and passion, could have encountered without ruin; and I leave you to guess, Madam, how such a man is likely to digest an accusation of perfidious treachery."

But (and here the artist stepped in), lest the blow should be too hard, he added the unanswerable plea:

"Was I to blame, Madam, in being the distracted victim of charms, which, I affirm, no man ever approached with impunity? Had I seen the least glimmering of hope that these charms could ever have been mine—or even had not iron necessity ——" But words were unavailing.

As to his recent visit to Edinburgh he would have called on her, he "could not have resisted it" were he not told that she positively declined to see him. Perhaps when he should have regained her good opinion he might solicit her friendship. "But be that as it may, the first of her sex I ever knew shall always be the object of my warmest good wishes."

He drew breath, as over another difficult feat neatly

accomplished. If he knew anything of womankind in general and Clarinda in particular, he had triumphed again.

Making an errand he rode into Dumfries and posted the letter, to obviate mishaps or delays. That done, he turned into the Globe Tavern and refreshed himself with a modest glass of punch, while the bright-eyed Anna Park, another heroine to be, smiled on him. Then slowly he rode home in the dusk, musing on many things, some of them not entirely pleasant.

CHAPTER 7

DESPITE the disenchantment of a bad bargain Burns was almost happy for a little while at Ellisland. If there was much to depress there was also something to hearten. In a modest way he was a man of substance. Being interpreted this meant that he was Master of a fairly plenished farm, men servants and maid servants, two of each, four stout, serviceable horses, ten milch cows, besides a handful of sheep, his own especial pets, with all the necessary implements and accessories, mostly brand new. For the first time he had a grateful feeling of ownership, of living under his own vine and fig tree. In short, he was respectable. Blessed word Respectable, in his case twice, thrice blessed.

In addition he had the emoluments of an Excise Officer, a provident provision against a rainy day.

One thing particularly gratified him. His mother and sisters came as visitors, and he was able to play the host as his heart desired. It was an exquisite satisfaction to mark his mother's joy in this new life and the promise it held.

"Eh! but I'm glad, glad to see a' this, dearie," she told him again and again, and the words made him glow as with rare wine.

Every beast he owned she examined minutely, horse, cow, and sheep, appraising each; she went round the fields with him, discussing the rotation of crops and methods of manuring, and giving hints on the management of servants. Often too she whipped on an apron, tucked up her sleeves and plunged into dairy work.

"Guidness' sake, d'ye no' see I'm thrang, woman?" she would retort laughingly when Jean protested. "Gae awa to yer man and yer weans and dinna fash me."

It made her feel young again, she declared, to do as she liked; but the real tonic, the real elixir of youth, was just to be with Robin, to watch him coming and going, to talk with him of all that concerned his welfare. Nothing was too trivial; nothing too commonplace. The smaller, more intimate the detail the closer to him she felt.

"Ye maun just put up wi' yer auld mother and her ways," she would smile at him. "Ye see she's no' a poet."

"A poet in action," he contradicted warmly.

He took her long walks by the Nith, pointing out this and that beauty spot where he loved to wander by himself.

"The auld habit," she said, half reproachfully. "The auld habit o' danderin' yer lane."

At Friar's Carse he introduced her to Captain Riddel, and Riddel was instantly attracted.

"My dear Burns, you have a jewel of a mother," was his private judgment.

"Many jewels in one," returned Burns, "May I be worthy of her."

Other visitors also came, less intimate, but only a shade less welcome, it seemed. One evening, as he stood by his open door, a grotesquely garbed, unkempt figure approached hop-step and skip, waving a battered hat in salutation. Burns sprang forward, as though greeting a long lost friend.

"Benny!" he cried, grabbing the grimy hand held out to him, "Benny Elliott!"

"The same and deil a ane else," was the excited response. "Ye didna expeck me, but I had to come to see ye ance mair or a's owre wi' me."

"And welcome as the sun in December," said Burns cordially. "Come your ways in by. The wife will be as glad to see you as I am."

Benny greeted her with, "Here comes the gaberlunzie man. Ye'll no' hae forgotten him, Mistress Burns."

A moment Jean held her breath, as at the sight of an apparition.

"Forgot him," she responded then, "Forgot Benny Elliott! Nae fear. It's a sicht for sair e'en, as the saying is. Here's a chair. Sit ye doon. What's the news this lang while? But I'm forgettin'. Ye maun hae something to eat first. Ye'll be tired and hungry."

"Indeed then, Mistress," replied Benny, with a smirk. "No to be leein', whilk is a thing I hate for a' it's sae fashionable wi' my betters, a bittie o' baith."

"How did you come?" asked Burns presently, while his guest was busy with oaten bannocks, half a kebbuck of cheese and a bowl of creamy milk. "Tramped it?"

"Maistly," came the answer between great mouthfuls. "Whiles I got a hurl frae a plewman body goin' to market, and ance the carrier gied me a bit lift, but it was maistly just Auld Adam's shanks. Folks were unco kind though, ance they kent where I was bound for. I had just to mention my freend, Poet Burns, and it was 'Help yersel'. Losh! ye're eatin' naething ava.' And aye the dram was ready, for a' the world as if I was my Lord."

He turned to Jean. "Ye should hear them speirin', Mistress Burns, and the messages they sent! I couldna' mind the half o' them in a week."

Jean beamed her delight. "Ay," she said, with a glance of pride at her husband, "Poet Burns is well kenned through a' the countryside."

"Well kenned," echoed Benny. "It's—what is't ye ca' it? A passport, ay, that's it, a passport to the finest feedin' and the saftest beds and the best drink atween Mauchline and Dumfries; that's what it is."

"It's not like Benny to flatter," put in Burns with a chuckle.

"Faith and that's true," was the ready response. "Benny's tongue was never dipped in honey that I ken

o'. But he has a kind o' likin' for the truth. And on this occasion he kens and you dinna."

Jean laughed joyously. "Well answered, Benny. Well answered."

"Are we to hae him misdootin' facts?" demanded Benny. "They're chieils that winna ding and downa be disputed. Maybe he'll tell us wha said that," he added triumphantly.

"Ah! Benny, Benny," said Burns, "What it is to be judged out of our own mouths."

Two nights and a day Benny stayed at Ellisland, surveying farm and plenishments (on which he warmly congratulated his host and hostess), and in particular giving news of Mauchline and its doings. Gavin Hamilton, he reported, was a "Wee thocht" under the weather in health; but Mr. and Mrs. Armour were in their "ordinar," and all was flourishing at Mossgiel.

"And Mr. Auld?" enquired Jean, with a doubtful little smile.

"Nae change," replied Benny crisply. "Glowerin' and scoldin' and damnin' just as per usual. The other day I met him in the street. 'Guid day t'ye, Maister Auld,' says I, liftin' my hat as was right and proper to a meenister. He turned on me a look as sour as whey a week auld. 'Heh! Heh!' says he, 'There's manners. I'm as you see!' 'Gettin' a bit frail, like the rest o' us,' says I. 'It's no joke keepin' sinners in their place. Amaist as sair a trackle as trampin' and beggin' ane's bread.' Ye should hae heard him snortin'. 'You appear to be mending,' says he. 'Keep on, for mind you this, brimstone fires are hot and Eternity's a long while.' And off he stumps, proddin' the grund wi' his stick as though it had done him wrang. No, there's no change in Maister Auld, nor ever like to be till he's happit and for good."

It was privately to Burns, in the course of an evening stroll by the Nith that he described a recent adventure

with another old acquaintance very closely associated with Mr. Auld.

"Ae nicht," related Benny, chortling as he spoke, "as I was hirplin' alang, wonderin' to mysel' where I was to get a bite and a bed a' at ance I hears a kind o' eldrich groan frae the roadside. 'Oh Lord. Oh! Lord, dinna desert thy servant like this!' Then the thing spiers, 'Are ye a Christian man?' 'I dinna want to bost,' says I, 'but I pass for ane when there's nae better goin'. Wha are ye onyway, in sic a plicht?' Weel, sir. Comin' near and lookin' close I made oot my man. 'Mercy on us, Maister Fisher, can this be you?' says I, pretendin' I couldna' believe my een. He gied a kind o' a gulp. 'Ay,' says he, 'I'm feart it is. And wha are you? Let's hae a look at ye. Dinna stand atween me and the moon. Ye're in the licht. There, that's better. Oh! my God, Benny Elliott,' says he. 'It'll be a' owre the countryside the morn's morn.' And he groaned something heartbreakin'. 'Hoots, dinna be skeert,' says I. 'Some folk ken hoo to sing mum when it's made worth their while. Just restin' a bit afore prayers like, Maister Fisher?' 'That's it,' says he. 'This road is a fair shame, stanes and holes and puddles that would droon a duck. I had to sit doon to rest mysel'.' 'It's a thing that often happens to me,' says I. 'And there's this aboot it, that ance ye're doon, my faith it's no' that easy gettin' up again. Can I do anythin' for ye, Maister Fisher?' 'Ay,' says he. 'Ye can gie's a hand up. I'm feelin' cauld ahint and my rheumatics is bad.' So I helps him up; but deil a bit o' him could stand.'

"'Ye see my condeetion, Benny Elliott,' says he, haudin' on to me. 'And I had just fower glasses, no' a drap mair, barrin' a toothfu' at the end. Ye'll believe that?' 'I'll believe anything ye like to tell me,' says I, gettin' a firmer grip. 'Maun hae been bad stuff. Ye're no' feelin' sick-like?' I had just gotten mysel' a new goon and I was kind o' feart he'd let oot. 'I'm a' richt,' says he, nearly

cowpin' baith o' us. 'But losh! What's the matter wi' the moon and stars that they're dancin' like that?' 'Oh, just a wee bit ploy o' their ain', says I. 'Even the moon and stars maun hae their fun.' 'Weel,' says he, 'I wish I was hame in my bed.'

"We started airm in airm; and as the man said, it wasna the length o' the road that troubled us but the breadth. 'Benny,' says he, haltin' to take breath. 'Ye're no' that bad, for a' they say aboot ye. Folk are sic leers. They lee aboot me. They say I'm gien to the drink, ay, and waur than that,' says he, 'they say I forget mysel' wi' the lasses.' 'When folk stop leein the deil may go oot o' business,' says I. 'As for the lasses, we hae Scripture for 't that Auld Nature swears, the lovely dears, her noblest work, she classes O. And is a man to be done oot o' his bit fling just because he's a kirk Elder? Nae fairness in that to man or woman.'

"Weel, sir, that set him aff. 'I ken where ye got that,' says he. 'I ken where ye got that.' And he rowts and he raves till I thocht he was goin' to hae a fit. That sobered him. He got on to 'Holy Willie's Prayer,' and just foamed till the slavers ran down his beard. Eh! it was a sicht. 'That deevil Burns,' says he, and ye micht amaisht smell the reek o' the pit as he spoke. 'That deevil Burns. He's made me nae better than a lauchin' stock. I wish he was maggots' meat.' "

"And he quite sincerely meant it," said Burns vastly amused.

"Meant it! He'd like to see ye in collops. Nae danger o' his wee pot o' Christian charity boilin' owre. At last I got him to his ain door. 'It's kind o' late and I canna weel ask ye in, Benny,' says he. 'The hizzies micht be talkin'. But I'll no' forget. And Benny,' says he, 'as ye hae Christian bowels and ken the frailty o' man, ye'll no' be sayin' anything o' this. If it gets to the ears o' the Kirk Session I'm a done man and me an Elder.' 'Say yer

prayers Maister Fisher,' says I, 'say yer prayers as per usual, and hae nae fear.' But Dod, sir," added Benny, with a chuckle, "they got wind o't and other things like it, and ae fine day what maun Holy Willie do but snoove awa afore the Session to hae Daddy Auld fair greetin' owre him. 'Ah! William, William, has it come to this? Drink and women, drink and women, they'll be the damnation of you, if you're not careful. Go,' says he, 'an' sin no more.' It was the joke o' the toon. So you see," ended Benny, "Mauchline is just—Mauchline, and will be till the last trump blows, I'm thinkin'."

On the morning of the second day he took a ceremonial farewell of Jean and the children; then Burns convoyed him to the outskirts of Ellisland. For a little while they sat side by side on a stone-dyke, as though to prolong the parting.

"And where awa' now, Benny?" Burns asked, breaking an awkward silence.

"Straight to the wee kirkyard amang the hills, that ye ken o'," answered Benny. "Ye see, it's like to be the last time, and she micht think Benny was forgettin' in the end if he missed goin'."

"Do you think she knows, Benny?"

"Ay, fine she knows," was the confident reply. "Man, do I no' hear her whisperin' to me in the dark? Only last nicht she was at it. 'Ye're a lang, lang time in comin', Benny. Mind I'm waitin'.' And I couldna' help answerin', 'Bide a wee, my dear. I'll soon be wi' ye noo.'"

As Burns did not speak he went on.

"It's a queer mixty-maxty world, Poet Burns, as nane kens better than you. Fine folk wi' a' the world can gie them, goin' like flowers o' spring, and Auld Benny left wi' his rags and his mealy bags, but the hame-gaen's no' far off noo, and then Benny Elliott, the beggarman, will be equal wi' the best. There's nae difference o' rank, thank God, where we're goin', Poet Burns."

As Burns was still silent Benny added:

"There's a wee pickle siller laid by to be ready when the time comes. I widna like it to be a pauper's grave; it wouldna be worthy o' her."

"And where do you wish to go, Benny?" Burns asked, mastering an emotion which meant more than Benny guessed or could guess.

"Where but beside her?" was the answer. "In the wee green spot amang the hills where nothing will break the quiet but the wind and the peewits and the running water; and, oh! my friend, it's so sound we'll sleep."

Burns gulped. Next minute he was off the dyke and holding out his hand. "God bless you—my old friend," he said on a hard breath and turned abruptly away. A moment Benny gazed after the hurrying figure in astonishment, never suspecting how he had ripped open old wounds.

CHAPTER 8

IT HAPPENED just then that the game of bilking the revenue was immensely popular among daring spirits in love with adventure and the chance of getting rich quick. The composition of the Excise was therefore a matter of intense personal moment. To cute, experienced smugglers the new appointment seemed entirely satisfactory. A poet, by no means an enemy to good liquor, if all tales were true, in fact a boon good fellow. Not likely to be too hard or too vigilant. Experts in bluffing and bamboozling would find him easy sport. They would hoodwink him to his face, stuff him with fables, or, if he were troublesome, fill him fou and keep him fou till the kegs of brandy and bales of silk were safe. The plan seemed the very essence of simplicity. But alas! for the best laid schemes of mice and men. With a shock of savage disgust they found the feckless rhymer and boon good fellow alert, keen, alarmingly energetic and most inexorably strict.

"He's just nae better nor any other gauger and waur than maist," they growled resentfully, as though the providence of smugglers played them false. "He's on ye afore ye ken; and the face o' him when he dander's up, my word! he'd knock ye doon wi' a look. And as for turnin' a blin' ee, ye micht as weel expeck mercy frae the deil ance he's got ye in his grip."

The duties were heavy and exacting. A weekly round of two hundred miles on horseback, over a division of ten parishes, plus incidental skirmishes by the way, often left him at the end of the day "jaded to death." In that condition he had then to turn to the hundred and one problems that beset a farmer struggling with exiguous means. Yet he contrived to find time, God and himself alone knew

how, for an elaborate, intensive correspondence with all manner of people—Mrs. Dunlop (now his habitual confidante), the poet Blacklock, the novelist Dr. Moore, the philosopher Dugald Stewart, Commissioner Graham, William Nicol, Robert Ainslie, and a miscellaneous host of others. Jean looked on amazed, and secretly full of misgiving. Like Martha she was troubled about many things. Cooking, washing, scrubbing, churning, cheese-making, from sunrise to sunset, and between whiles keeping an eye on barn, byre, and field, she frankly thought all this literary activity a sheer waste of precious time and energy.

"The fairm," she would say to herself. "The fairm needs mair attention than it's gettin', and ye'd think there was naething in his head but letters and sangs."

Of food, being home-produced, there was no lack, but boots and clothes were frightfully dear, and she knew the exchequer was running low. Yet Robert would waste time and brain and strength on things which brought no grist to the mill. And as if resolved to hamper himself still more what must he do but essay the thankless, useless task of trying to educate his neighbours. Nithsdale, he told her, reposed supinely as in a mud-bath of sloth, ignorance, and stupidity. The cattle that browsed on its pastures had as much mind, almost, as the men who owned them, and the women who milked, churned and produced children as in a competitive race to increase the population. Not a bright idea to the square mile. For such illiteracy and thick-wittedness there was but one cure—books. So in conjunction with his friend, Captain Riddel, he founded the Monkland Friendly Society, a book-club or circulating library, one of the first of its kind. As director and sole buyer he showed a catholic taste and a fine discriminating sense of local needs. The list is illuminating. Blair's *Sermons*, Knox on the Reformation, Hervey's "*Meditations among the Tombs*," Boston's "*Human Nature in its Fourfold State*," Marshall's "*Mystery of Sanctification*," Wat-

son's "Body of Divinity," Price on "Providence and Prayer," these and some others like them, he fancied would rouse sluggish rustics to a wholesome fear of hell, far more effectually than the Sunday harangues of that droning Calvinist, the Rev. Joseph Kirkpatrick in Dunscore Parish Church. As less disturbing fare he included the histories of Hume and Robertson, and by way of condiment, "Don Quixote," "The Arabian Nights," and "The Man of Feeling." For private reading he slipped in Shakespeare, Sterne, Smollet and some of the spicier Restoration dramatists.

The books arrived at Ellisland by carrier. Eagerly unpacking and setting them out on a table he called Jean to admire his treasures. She gaped.

"Eh! Robert, mercy on us, are ye for readin' a' thae? I'd think it kin' o' wicked waste o' time."

Her unsympathetic inanity irritated him. It was on his tongue to retort, "For God's sake, woman, try not to be stupid." But holding himself in, he merely said:

"Ay, Jean, I'm for reading them every one, some of them twice over likely." And bundling them back into their box, he turned away, hurt and resentful. So this was the sympathy, the encouragement he got in his own house, from the woman who was his wife.

"If I were carting dung or mucking byres," he told himself hotly, "she'd be all over me for joy, but books ——"

He went on with his work—as farmer, ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing, going to market; as Excise officer scouring the countryside on horse-back, gauging barrels, granting permits, outwitting smugglers. Sometimes at nightfall he did not hasten home. More and more frequently he turned his horse's head towards Dumfries and the Globe Inn. The Globe was warm and sociable. He could always count on meeting some jolly blades there, and Anna of "the Gowden locks" met him with a sly smile and a challenge in her luring eyes. At times he found

himself thinking of Anna as he rode about his business. Then he would pull himself up with a jerk. No wandering of desire; it would not do. He must, he must be prudent. Often he reached home drenched, to find Jean waiting for him with dry warm clothes. As she made haste to pull off his sodden riding-boots he would look down at her with a twinge of remorse. So devoted, so affectionate, so anxious. Poor girl, what a pity God omitted to endow her with brains.

Sometimes in jogging among the Nithsdale hills in happy forgetfulness of smugglers and their nefarious ways he "Met the Muses," more properly his own native Muse, she who had crowned him with the sacred holly. The meeting was always joyous.

"You have done beyond all hope and expectation," she would tell him in effect. "The laurels I bestowed are doubly won. But there is much to do. Your country's song needs you."

And with fresh and quickened ardour he gave himself to the glorious task, making new songs out of old and in the process producing such little masterpieces as "Auld Lang Syne," "John Anderson, my Jo," "Whistle o'er the Lave o't," and a score of others, destined for immortality.

All these varied activities, each concentrated and absorbing, did not, however, dull the edge of the ever lively social instinct. Over the wine he spent hours with Riddel in high talk of politics and politicians—Fox, his favorite, Pitt, "Paddy Burks," Dundas, the grand dispenser of patronage in Scotland, from whom he once expected favors and got nothing save private sneers and veiled hostility. More enthralling still were the talks on literature and literary men—the foolish, ever endearing Goldsmith, the witty, delightful Sheridan, the great bear Johnson and his smug satellite, the garrulous, self-consequent, Jamie Boswell. Those were golden hours.

Over the steaming toddy, too, he held confabs with

neighbouring farmers on crops and cattle and markets, breaking into sudden aerial flights which almost made them forget their drink and transported their fat wives into regions which left them light-headed with wonder. Never before was such speech heard in Nithsdale and never since. In addition, there were merry makings, at ever shortening intervals in the Globe tavern: and, present copestone of social glee, the meeting at Moffat with Nicol and Allan Masterton, celebrated to the lasting joy of all convivial souls in "Willie brew'd a Peck o' Maut."

A full life, an overflowing life, you would say, which left little time or scope for memories and regrets. True, but for this one significant fact—that Burns was—Burns. His second autumn as Master of Ellisland came round. One evening in late October, his ploughman, William Clark, coming upon him unexpectedly, found him pacing to and fro in the stack-yard in a state of wild agitation.

"Lord sake, Maister," cried the startled William, "is onything wrang?"

"Nothing that you can set right, William, but say nothing about it," Burns answered and turned abruptly away.

Presently Jean came forth seeking him, but could not find him.

"He's aff for ane o' his danders," William Clark told her.

"At this time o' nicht," said Jean anxiously. "Is he alane?"

"His lee lane, Mistress."

When after a long absence he returned he was drenched with dew.

"Eh! Robert, but ye look cauld," Jean exclaimed, at sight of his drawn, pinched face.

"I am cold," said Robert, "cold to the bone."

She made haste to get him something hot, wisely reserving questions for another time. He made a pretence

of eating and went to bed; but not to sleep. The black hours dragged drearily; but at last when it seemed he could bear no more he caught a glimpse of the morning star twinkling and trembling as with some great message. Making sure that Jean was fast asleep he rose softly, flung on his clothes and crept off to the tiny room set apart for himself. And there the flood of emotion that made the night miserable found vent.

Thou ling'ring star, with less'ning ray,
That lov'st to greet the early morn;
Again thou usher'st in the day,
My Mary from my soul was torn.

Ah! Mary, Mary! Oh! Mystery of the unforgetting human heart.

CHAPTER 9

THERE came to Ellisland, among other notable visitors, "A fine fat fodgel wight," that is to say a Falstaff in miniature, with all Falstaff's valour with trencher and bottle and more than Falstaff's conceit of himself. He was Francis Grose, late Captain of Militia, now professional antiquary for sake of the needful shekels. In his bright youth he had won the reputation of an arch *bon-vivant*. The rôle was costly, and left him grievously impoverished, but neither vexed nor depressed. Like Yorick, the King's jester, he was born to be comic, and misfortune was but an enlarged opportunity for free philosophic gaiety. Having done the antiquities of England and Wales, in four great volumes, he had crossed the border to confer a similar honour on Scotland.

Burns took to him as to a comedian providentially designed to lighten the boredom of life. His racy anecdotes, his quaint conceits and quiddities, his smug complacency, even his shameless vanity and fundamental stupidity were made palatable by an overflowing good nature. On his part being, as the stupid often are, shrewder than he appeared, he instantly saw that in his present enterprise a poet whom Scotland seemed to value, might well be turned to profitable account.

"Burns, I want your help," he remarked in an affable, offhand way at Riddel's dinner-table.

"In what?" asked Burns.

"In doing justice to Scotland."

"I'm your man," replied Burns crisply. "And the plan, the project?"

Beaming and rubbing his fat hands Grose explained. He had delighted England; he had delighted Wales; now it was his dearest wish to delight Scotland. Though un-

fortunately born without the distinction of Scottish blood—he adored her. One had only to think of her past, her monuments, her beautiful romantic ruins, her legends and traditions, her splendid hair-raising superstitions.

“Ah! my dear sir,” he exclaimed, “if we had only the luck to catch a witch and behold her burning in the grand old style what a lovely picture for my book.”

“Too late,” said Burns. “Witch-burning is some seventy years out of fashion. But you might do better. The fates favouring, you might run up against the devil himself. It is his pleasure at times to take a turn round these parts.”

“*In propria persona?*”

“*In propria persona.*”

“Does he, does he indeed? Well! now think of that. Free to roam the world, to go up and down in all its pleasant places just as he likes, and choosing Scotland. There’s a compliment.”

“We are a loyal folk, Grose,” put in Riddel gravely. “In our faith, with reverence be it spoken, Nickie-Ben occupies a conspicuous place, one might almost say a place of honour. We could no more think of going back on him than we could think of going back on our revered grandmother seated in the chimney corner. Elsewhere they’re for abolishing him, I understand. No devil; no hell. We refuse to give up either. So he comes ——”

“Like a king among his own, as it were,” chuckled Grose. “Very appreciative. A bit chilly, I should judge for a gentleman used to so much warmth when he’s at home. But the welcome’s everything. He must be gratified to feel you believe in him so whole-heartedly.”

“Believe in him,” echoed Riddel. “Seeing is believing, isn’t it? Ask our friend Burns about that, or better still read a certain Address. That’ll enlighten you. Its author can post you in that and all kindred matters.”

It was the very thing Grose wanted. So Burns obligingly stuffed him with all the tales of diablerie, of witches

and warlocks, wizards, sorcerers, ghosts, brownies, bogles, and all uncanny things he could remember or invent, a vast and varied store. Grose took it all in like a cat lapping cream.

"Most picturesque, most romantic, most eerie," he would purr appreciatively. "Dear old Scotland. Please go on." One tale of drink and devilry especially pleased him.

"Do, my friend," he begged. "Do me the favour of committing it to writing. I will then incorporate it in my book, and so, shall I say? send our names linked together down, down to ages yet unborn."

"Immortality assured," laughed Burns, who had a comic picture of himself hanging on the shining skirts of the celebrated F. G.

Nevertheless the suggestion set imagination afire. So it came to pass that late next night, after he had ridden thirty-five miles on Excise duty, Jean found him in his own tiny closet of a workroom writing as for dear life.

"Whit's the weary work noo, Robert?" she enquired. He told her.

"Slavin' yersel' to death for that Captain Grose," she said in unconcealed disapproval. "Pesterin' ye as if ye had naething to do but fash wi' him. The man has nae conscience."

"The feint a conscience," agreed Burns, blithely. "Just the unregenerate son of a horse leech."

"I'd let him do his writin' for himsel'," said Jean decisively. "I wonder at him. My faith, he's no blate. Just thinks ye should skip and run when he likes to whistle. Ye maun be done oot. Come awa' to yer bed."

"In a jiffey," replied Burns, and fell again to his writing.

"There he goes," Jean grumbled to herself, as she went off. "Here's him a gauger, forby a fairm and a family, and ye'd think he had naething to do but write, write, write. Daft I ca' it. As for this man Grose a' he's good

for is to eat and drink and make pictures o' tumble down kirks and things that a half-witted bairn would lauch at."

Jean neither felt nor feigned an interest in antiquities, and though Grose sometimes amused her she did not like him. In he would come hindering her in her work, with his condescending manner and his ridiculous attempts to imitate her speech.

"Weel! and hoo's a' wi' ye, the day, Mistress Burns?" that with a snicker and an English accent. She scarcely knew whether to laugh or slap his face for him. Then he drank a deal of rum and water, and when he had done drinking nothing would do him but lure Robert off to Friar's Carse, keeping him till all hours of the morning. Yet it was no use talking to Robert. This disease of writing, when he ought to be sleeping or attending to other things, was in the blood. It was bad enough without the aggravations of this pompous, selfish porpoise of a Grose.

With Burns's effort in the eerie and awful, Grose was delighted. But it was in prose.

"You're a poet, Burns," he said in his most flattering tone. "Would it not be more in character if you turned it into verse?" Burns thought a moment.

"If I'm equal to the task. Only please bear in mind that my rustic Muse prefers to amble to the Doric cadence."

"My dear friend," said Grose impressively. "It is a great opportunity. Pray, let her amble."

Burns remembered a tale of Kirk Alloway Witches he wrote in his callow youth. It had lain forgotten beside that other early production "The Jolly Beggars." He searched it out, thought it had some crude merit, and rewrote and again rewrote it in a delirium of excitement. The result was "Tam o' Shanter; A Tale." In his enthusiasm he recited it to Jean, striding up and down the room, gesticulating, exploding in peals of laughter. For a

moment she thought he had gone crazy. All this writing about doubtful subjects at unearthly hours was turning his brain. Instead of a douce, solid farmer she beheld a raving poet.

"Dearie me, Robert," was her comment, when he finished wild-eyed and out of breath. "It's frichtsome. Ye gie me the cauld grue. Think o' writin' a that just—just as if it was true. I'd hae naething to do wi' deils and witches and drunken Tam o' Shanters if I was you."

He looked at her suddenly sobered.

"And you'd be wise," he said curtly, feeling for the hundredth time how little his real interests appealed to her.

Grose was beside himself with joy. The dialect boggled him, but did not abate his rapture.

"Your Doric Muse has done it this time," he cried, rubbing his hands gleefully. "That's the stuff, Burns, that's the stuff."

In print, however, he expressed his pleasure and his gratitude somewhat less ardently. For "the pretty tale" accompanying his picture of the venerable Alloway church he was "obligated" to his "ingenious friend, Mr. Robert Burns."

"Ingenious," laughed Burns, slapping his leg. "Ingenious. The trumpet of fame in full blast. Up higher yet, my bonnet."

When presently Grose went his way Burns missed him, but there were other diversions, some of them new and exciting.

Business took him more and more to Dumfries, and pleasure more and more to the Globe Tavern, where Anna of the witching smile awaited him with "favours secret, sweet, and precious." Once again, as though all good resolutions were forgotten, it was *Vive l'amour*. The fact was joyously celebrated in "Yestreen I had a Pint of Wine,"

in which the raven-plumaged Night (sun, moon, and stars chastely withdrawn) was invoked to come.

And bring an Angel-pen to write
My transports wi' my Anna.

Certainly it was the old resurgent Burns that prompted the defiant postscript:

The Kirk an' State may join an' tell
To do sic things I mauna;
The Kirk and State may gae to hell,
And I'll gae to my Anna.

Poor Jean. Horace and Gavin Hamilton were right. Thrust out human nature with a pitch-fork, it will always return.

Meanwhile matters of a totally different kind were pressing hard upon him. One disastrous fact could no longer be denied or ignored—that his Ellisland venture was a failure. Depressed and irritated he wrote to his brother, Gilbert. "This farm has undone my enjoyment in myself. It is a ruinous affair on all hands. But let it go to hell. I'll fight it out and be off with it." To Jean he said suddenly one day, "I find that if we're going to pay our debts we must clear out of this, and the sooner the better." She gazed at him dumbfounded: then getting her breath she quavered:

"I was feared o' that. Oh! Robert, maun we leave? We've been happy thegither here, hae we no'?" After a pause she asked. "Does Agnes ken?"

With a sister's devotion Agnes had come from Mossgiel to manage the dairy: but from the first found the task hopeless.

"We've been fighting and planning, Jean and me," she told him with tears in her eyes. "But, oh! my dear, we can't make ends meet."

"Then end it," he said.

He was practical enough now. His little fortune was

gone in rent, in wages, in family expenses; and from Creech and his kind there was no hope of aid. To prolong the tenancy would be to court bankruptcy, and better death than the disgrace of owing any man a penny he could not pay.

Next morning he was in the saddle with the dawn, and returned late and fagged, but neither too late nor too fagged to steal out in the dusk for a solitary walk round the fields, and a talk to cows and horses as though they could understand the unhappy events in the wind.

When word flew that Ellisland was throwing up the sponge, selling off holus bolus, lock, stock, and barrel, there was a flutter of talk, but the wiseacres were in no way surprised.

"There ye are," they said one to another, mouthing their own sapiency like a sweet morsel. "There ye are. I telt ye whit would happen. It taks gumption to be a fairmer."

Gauger Burns was grand at the rhyming business; but "och, man dear," he had little skill in making mother earth contribute to his fortunes. More from curiosity than sympathy they crowded to the "roup" (auction), first of crops, and, a little later, of stock and implements. Over both events Bacchus presided in full glory. Of the final scene, even Burns with all his toleration, was moved to report in disgust, "About thirty people engaged in a battle, every man for his own hand, and fought it out for three hours. Nor was the scene much better in the house. No fighting, indeed, but folks lying drunk on the floor and decanting until both my dogs got so drunk by attending on them, they could not stand."

So ended the Ellisland adventure and his career as farmer.

CHAPTER 10

A TINY flat of three tiny rooms, with a tiny back kitchen, on the second floor of a three-storeyed house in a dreary Dumfries street—that was the new home of Burns and his family. Below was the office of John Syme, Distributor of Stamps; above was the lodging of John Hough, blacksmith, a cheery, babbling soul who did his best to be sociable. Half the old furniture had to be sold or given away from lack of space; the other half scarcely left room for the inmates to move about. It was a poor exchange for the freedom, the spaciousness, the open spaces and fresh, sweet air of Ellisland. Viewing it all, Burns sighed gloomily.

And there were other causes of depression. The good old Scots custom prescribed that weddings, christenings, funerals and flittings should be celebrated with hospitable rites and a free flow of liquor. Burns was not the man to neglect his country's time-honoured ordinances. So it happened that he began his new phase of life in a purgatory "of penitence, regret, remorse, headache, nausea, and all the rest of the d——d hounds of hell that beset a poor wretch who has been guilty of the sin of drunkenness." In vain he tried to beat off the hell hounds; they held fast. Listless, enervated, sick of the world, doubly sick of himself, he counted the leaden hours, brooding on his misery, listening to the accusations of conscience and the querulous complaints of Jean.

"My wife scolds me," he confessed to Robert Ainslie. "My business torments me, and my sins come staring me in the face, every one telling me a more bitter tale than his fellows."

How was the evil spell to be broken? He thought of Edinburgh and the gay fellows and fine, sprightly ladies

up there. The jollity of men, the smiles, the laughter, perhaps the flatteries, of lively women, there of a surety was the right medicine for his malady.

Clarinda, in particular, was there. Clarinda! The very name was still delicious music. She had been angry and insulting; but bless her! she had got over her tantrum. Besides he had still some business to settle with the evasive Creech. To Edinburgh then for a taste of the old joys. Accordingly he got official leave, and went off on "a week's excursion among old friends." Privately he paused a little over the word "friends." Should he find them as they had been, or would yesterday's smiles be today's starched faces and cold looks? Who could tell? The cold shoulder would be unpleasant; but at any rate the venture would be one step more in the study and exploration of human nature.

One man he found unchanged. Creech was still—Creech. His claret cup was as ready as ever, his smile as benign, his air as patronizing.

"I am thinking of a new edition of the Poems," he told Burns, as one resolved upon a gratuitous and foolish piece of generosity.

"Yes?" said Burns.

"And I want all the fresh stuff I can get. Down there among the beautiful and inspiring scenery of the Nith, it is the Nith—isn't it? I am sure your Muse has not been asleep. She's a lively lady. Couldn't keep her still if you tried. Well! any little thing we can add will come in handy. Folk like to think they're getting value for their money. Human nature, I suppose."

"As human almost as hunger and thirst," agreed Burns. "And the possible or probable return to author and publisher?"

Creech smiled the old half-pitying smile at the simple child-like innocence of a poet.

"Return?" he echoed, scarcely able to keep his mirth within the bounds of politeness. "My dear sir, we'll be

lucky if the new edition I contemplate repays the cost of production, very lucky indeed."

"Then why trouble doing it?" asked Burns.

Mr. Creech spread both his hands as if pronouncing a benediction.

"Because I am interested, because I am here to push and protect the interests of my authors, you especially, my dear Burns."

Burns laughed, and changing the subject left without hint or promise of help.

"The vampire book-seller still a vampire," he said to himself outside. "So the bloom is off the peach. Yet he's ready to run the risk of ruining himself for my sake. The liar."

And the "fresh stuff" was to be provided for nothing. Quite so. If all book-sellers were thugs and brigands of the Creech order, then he hoped that real, red-hot retribution should one day be their portion.

Luckily there were more agreeable meetings. The enthusiasm and goodwill of Blacklock and Mackenzie continued unabated. Dugald Stewart was gracious and appreciative, and the great *arbiter elegantiarum*, Blair, not too painfully condescending. Willie Nicol was as joyously eager as ever to fill and empty the flowing bowl after his day's thrashing of High School boys and quarrelling with Adam, the Rector; Ainslie, too, was bright and cordial, if a little chastened by experience; but John Richmond had put on the starched raiment of the Puritan. The past being well buried, he had providently taken thought for the future. Therefore, he was civil but chilly. Not once did he mention the Court of Equity, or make the slightest allusion to old unhappy amatory mishaps in Mauchline.

Others, too, had suffered a change. Some of the gayest of gay blades, once so pressing and jovial, were now so much engrossed in business, so terribly burdened with engagements that they had not a moment to spare. Where

formerly it was "Here's to Scotia's Bard, the King of Good fellows"; now it was "Oh! Mr. Burns, what a stranger. How d'ye do, how d'ye do? Having a little holiday? Deplorable weather. Our climate leaves much to be desired. And how's the world using you? Writing more poetry, of course? We haven't been hearing anything of it lately."

Burns curled up in pride. Creech was right. The bloom *was* off the peach, and the trumpets were silent. Well! Well! the world swung on its axis precisely as before; and he, Robert Burns, stood, squarely he hoped, on his own two feet.

One, however, "the dearest of the quorum," made up for all change, all chilliness. He went to Clarinda feverishly hoping and was not disappointed. She knew he was coming, and sat a full hour in agitated expectation counting the slow, slow minutes till of a sudden her heart stopped. His step, the step she would know among a thousand. Quivering, trembling, she was at the door to meet him. For one moment he stood regarding her with a keen concentrated look which said, "Is it peace?" then moving forward, he took her hand, looking very straight into her face.

"We are friends again?" he said simply.

She looked up into his eyes, those eyes which no woman could ever withstand.

"Friends," she faltered. "Friends—always."

They sat down face to face. He would have made his explanations and excuses afresh; but with a quick, forbidding gesture, she stopped him.

"Please," she begged. "Not a word about—about what has happened," adding, after a pause, "I have thought and thought, my dear, and—and you behaved as a man of honour should."

He bent forward, caught her hand and kissed it in gratitude.

She was wildly excited, first by his coming, and next

by her own impending departure to join the truant McLehose in Jamaica.

"Yes," she told him, "I am going. He has sent for me. I cannot refuse."

He drew a deep, half-shuddering breath. "Is that a warning to keep off? Does it mean that you will not or cannot see me any more?"

"Oh! no, no. I will see you while you are in Edinburgh. Often, often, I hope. You see ——" she could scarcely get the words out, "you see, when we part now we may never meet again."

"That's a knell straight on the heart. And in the new land with its novelties and excitements, not to speak of other things, you'll forget."

"Forget," she cried in a tone of reproach. "Never, never as long as I live. How could I? But, my dear, we must remember our duty also. Our ——" "love" was on her tongue, but she caught herself in time. "Our friendship has been without stain. Let us keep it so. I have my duties as a wife and you have yours as a husband."

So the old "friendship" was renewed, only now it was fraught with new meanings, tinged with a new sadness. Every spare moment Burns was at General's Entry, and for every visit Clarinda waited with an impatience that was almost agony. A week passed, a week in which emotion seemed to run the whole gamut of bliss and woe. Then late one night the parting came. The poet, true to himself, and his vocation commemorated the final scene in a gallant little piece:

O! May, thy morn was ne'er so sweet
As the mirk night o' December——

into which a prurient criticism has tried to read a meaning of its own. Its innuendoes may be disregarded. As Burns rode southward far other thoughts than triumphs of gallantry occupied his mind. Clarinda's fateful words haunted

him, "We may never meet again." Something told him the fatal truth. He had looked into her eyes, heard her voice, held her in his arms, for the last time. A second time he had lost the woman he loved. And out of the desolate feeling came the song, rather the dirge of the riven heart lamenting what could never be.

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever,
Ae fareweel, Alas! for ever.
Had we never lov'd sae kindly!
Had we never lov'd sae blindly!
Never met—or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Tears dimmed his eyes as he wrote; tears blinded Clarinda's eyes as she read. Broken-hearted! She bowed her head sobbing.

But she durst not now put her feelings into writing. So she sent her farewell message thus:

"Agitated, hurried to death, I sit down to write a few lines to you, my ever dear, dear friend. We are ordered aboard on Saturday—to sail on Sunday. And now I have a few things to say to you, as the last advice of her who could have lived or died with you. I am happy to know of your applying so steadily to the business you have engaged in; but, oh! remember, this life is a short passing scene. Seek God's favour—keep his commandments, be solicitous to prepare for a happy eternity; there, I trust we will meet in perfect and never ending bliss. . . . Another thing and I have done; as you value my peace, do not write me to Jamaica until I let you know you may with safety. And now adieu! May God Almighty bless you and yours. Farewell."

She was to go by the *Roselle*, the ship by which he had arranged to sail had the Ellisland venture miscarried.

CHAPTER 11

THE uncongenial duty of "grinding the faces of the Publican and Sinner on the merciless wheels of the Excise" was sometimes enlivened by an exhilarating spice of danger. One bleak February day, scouts reported a rakish, nefarious looking craft in the Solway Firth. A gale, or bad seamanship, sent her aground; then the Excise made her out to be the brig *Rosamond*, full to the bulwarks of contraband, and showing her dragon-teeth in the shape of formidable short-range guns. To deal with her military aid was necessary. Accordingly dragoons were summoned, while Burns, with a handful of men, kept watch. The conditions were those of Nova Zembla in a slush of sleet, mire and sea water, with a bitter, squally wind blowing.

"Dreich work waitin' for the sodgers," remarked one of the guard, blowing on his numb hands, and splashing in the mud for warmth. "Some of the brandy aboard that bonnie brig would be no bad thing, this minute. A gill would warm the cockles o' a man's heart."

"Make it twa and a drappie owre," observed a second. "If thae smuggler folk had Christian bowels a wee keg would come driftin' ashore—by accident."

"No use grumbling, my lads," put in Burns cheerily. "Grumbling never yet took the edge off a whistling north wind or made a salt quagmire a bed of roses."

"Mair's the pity," was the response. "If grumblin' set things richt in this world, man, it's the grand time we'd be havin'. Howsomever, we can aye pretend to be what we're no'. You're a poet. Gie's a bit sang on the business. It'll be the next best thing to brandy."

And with smiling readiness, Burns gave them impromptu:

The deil cam' fiddlin' thro' the town,
And danc'd awa wi' the Exciseman.

Presently the dragoons arrived with warlike looks and a brave clatter of accoutrements.

"What the devil have we here?" demanded the Captain fiercely, who was cross because he had been disturbed at his dice and his bottle. "Our horses nearly foundered in pits of slime for a parcel of damn smugglers. I'll have every mother's son of them hanged from their own yard-arm."

"Got to catch your hare before cooking it, Captain," said Burns, quietly. "Better dismount your men."

Sword in hand he led the attack, wading thigh-deep. To his surprise, the brig surrendered without shot fired or cutlass drawn. But, as he climbed, a black, evil-visaged man leaned over the side and laughed mockingly.

"Oh! ho. Guid save us, can it be? Rantin' rovin' Robin a gauger."

Burns paid no heed, being busy with other things, but a little later when marching a prisoner by his stirrup, the man looked up with an insolent grin.

"I was at Campbeltown no' lang syne," he said, showing his yellow, tobacco-stained teeth, "among some o' yer grand freends there. Hoo's that Hieland wench o' yours?"

Burns bent quickly sideways. "What's that?"

The man grinned yet more insolently. "I thoct ye'd like to ken. As an auld freend ——"

"Friend?" interrupted Burns peremptorily. "You were never a friend of mine, old or new."

"Was I no' though, was I no'? I'm feart this gauger business is spoilin' yer memory, Maister Burns. It sticks in my mind we've clinked glesses afore noo. Anyway, I've heard ye rantin' oot yer rhymes. I'm frae Ayr; ye'll ken what that means." He paused to let the words go home. "And as I was sayin' I was in Campbeltown no' lang syne—God, it's a rotten hole. I mind there was a bit

splore owre that Hieland lass o' yours, what this they ca'ed her? Oh! ay, Morag, whilk I understand is 'Mary' in their lingo. They said she was ——"

Of a sudden Burns bent lower. "Silence," he ordered through clenched teeth. "One word more and I'll slash your foul mouth with my sword."

The man obeyed, for the face that blazed above him was the face of one who would probably keep his word. But for many a day and many a night the incident troubled Burns. Here was something of which he had no knowledge. Had that leering, gibing rake-hell been spreading scandal at Campbeltown to the shame, perhaps the torture, of his pure, gentle-souled Mary? It was a question which in moments of lonely thought, brought a cold sweat to his brow. Lord! how the past seemed to rise up in judgment.

The brig *Rosamond*, with her cargo and armament, was sold by public auction, and Burns got his modest share of prize-money, plus an official compliment on his courage and vigilance. As a memento, he bought for himself four Carronades at a cost of £3, and by that act unwittingly laid up trouble. Excitement was in the air. Across the channel the sky was red with the glare of revolution. After furtive, sporadic outbreaks (promptly suppressed by government fire-engines) the incendiary ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau had spread, setting France ablaze, and King's palaces were on fire, making the world lurid with their smoke and flame. Even sluggish Dumfries woke up in a fit of abhorrence for the riotous, rebellious French, who, as Mr. Burke eloquently pointed out, were no better than raging, ravening beasts of prey with a horrid lust for royal blood.

Burns hailed the conflagration as the belated vengeance of democracy on tyrants and robbers. Naturally there was bloodshed. Blood was ever the price of Liberty. But whereas the poor, blind, deluded people had hitherto given

their blood for selfish, worthless kings and rulers and quarrels not their own, they were now giving it for themselves, for home and wives and children—and future generations. Eternal Justice had spoken and here was the stern Judgment.

As a token of appreciation, some demon prompted him to despatch his Carronades to the Legislative Assembly in Paris, with a laudatory compromising letter. Guns and letter were seized at Dover. The Authorities would have no meddling with high international affairs, or high affairs of any sort, by a Dumfries Exciseman. Let the Cobbler stick to his last.

"They're very mighty up there in London," the culprit told Jean wrathfully over a frugal supper in the Wee Vennel. "But they can't put me down."

She looked at him anxiously. "Is it wise, Robert?" she asked, thinking of the bread-and-butter question.

"Is what wise?"

"You're an Excise Officer," she faltered.

"And therefore muzzled like a dangerous dog; no barking except as I'm told."

She saw he was in no mood to be opposed or criticized; but she could not help referring to the danger of offending folk in power.

"Just so," he retorted hotly. "Folk in power. When they nod we grovel; they speak and we echo; if they're angry, we tremble. Very charming, isn't it? However, as you remind me, I'm an Excise Officer and on that score I'll set your mind at ease. So far no man has been able to say that I have neglected my duty or disgraced my commission; no man, if I can help it, shall be able to say it in future. Does that please you?"

She drew a deep breath. "Ay, dearie, that pleases me. I was frichened for the weans."

He was as good as his word. To the Excise Officer duty came first, and was performed with scrupulous fidel-

ity. But the man? Had he no soul to save, no sentiment to cherish, no opinion to express, except as superiors were pleased to dictate? Was he to surrender brain and manhood for a mess of pottage, consisting of seventy pounds per annum, plus some fractional chances of prize-money? Every instinct of his nature revolted at the idea. He was not to be muzzled by men for whose conduct and abilities (for most part) he had nothing but contempt.

So he went his own wild, impetuous way, spouting politics in the Globe Tavern to snuffy, red-nosed toppers bent on nothing but drink, writing election ballads for political friends, chanting healths. "To Them that's Awa'," and flinging his challenge in the face of pretenders with the hymn of Independence, "A Man's a Man for a' that." Great folk might not like to be told that

The rank is but the guinea-stamp.

The man's the gowd, for a' that.

He did not care. It was the truth, God's own truth, and he would proclaim it while he had breath to draw.

In consequence there were dark whisperings and murmurings behind doors. Those with axes to grind, or favours to seek, or dignities to preserve, or merely a passion for tittle-tattle to gratify, began to keep a detective eye on Burns, the gauger. Of Burns, the poet, they never thought.

CHAPTER 12

DUMFRIES was a dreadful little town. Snobbish (in its petty parochial way), self-important, sanctimonious, censorious and always prurient, it loved scandal as it loved strong drink, which is to say with all its heart and soul; and the grosser, the better. Burns, from the first an object of curiosity, was very soon the subject of acid, acrimonious criticism. He was proud, he was sarcastic, he scoffed at wealth, doubtless because he had so little of it himself. Wasn't there a suggestive fable about a certain fox and sour grapes?

More and more, too, he paraded his abominable political blasphemies. High old Tories, the pompous little bosses of bragging little cliques and coteries, growled and looked daggers over the man's insolent attempts to deride and wreck a Heaven-devised political machine. It was darkly suspected that he questioned the divine right of Kings; it was known that he held all men were born free and equal, and had equal rights. By his way of it, he was all for the people, the clamorous, discontented canaille who were for ever complaining and for ever rebellious, like the blood-thirsty *sans culottes* of Paris in whose diabolical deeds he gloried. Preposterous.

And he said nasty things in such a nasty way. Thus he was heard to remark that if brains were the test, the whole gang of local politicians would be out of action in a week; and when he wanted to ridicule a noble lord, what must he do but put his devilish sarcasms into the mouth of Beelzebub? Intolerable. It would not do. Gauger Burns must be taught to keep his place, to mend his manners, to understand that his betters were—his betters.

To gossips, however, and they included the élite of the town, he was as manna direct from Heaven. His name was

more in men's mouths (and women's) than any other name had ever been in the whole history of the place—not as the genius who was shedding lustre on his country, but as the rebel who openly, defiantly indulged in practices which all discreet, respectable people kept dark. Nothing *sub rosa* for him, if you please. That there might be no mistake about his gospel, hadn't he the face to inscribe it with a diamond pen on a window of the Globe Tavern for all the world to see?

The gray-beard, Old Wisdom, may boast of his treasures,
Give me with gay Folly to live;
I grant him calm-blooded, time-settled pleasures;
But Folly has raptures to give.

"There you are," they said. "There you are. The man maun be daft."

Nor was he any mere theorist preaching what he dared not practise. Frequenters of the "Globe" were soon nudging one another and looking wise over his undisguised attentions to Ann Park, niece of Mrs. Hyslop, the landlady, and her smiling, too facile, responses. Ann was never a hater of men, and Gauger Burns had a way with women.

Hence there was no surprise, though an infinity of cackling, when she went off abruptly for a holiday in Leith. And in due course came the expected word. A child was born. Then followed quickly the news that poor Ann would never again smile on boozers in the Globe Tavern. She had paid the uttermost price for her folly. She was dead. Ten days later Jean gave birth to her son, William Nicol.

Here was a sensation to gloat over, and Dumfries gloated. It was Mauchline over again, with hard and bitter aggravations. Happily for Burns his Excise superiors had no official knowledge of the affair, nor any desire to meddle. Only Collector Mitchell remarked privately to Supervisor Findlater, "What a pity!" and enquired if there were any lapse from duty.

"None, none whatever," was the emphatic answer. "I find him most vigilant and efficient."

"Then, of course, we know nothing of the matter," said Mitchell. "We're not paid to administer the moral code of Dumfries. God knows, there are plenty of others ready and willing to do that. But I wish for his own sake, he'd be a little more discreet, have more regard for certain of the Ten Commandments. So wise for others. Why the devil cannot he be a little wise for himself? I've been reading his poetry. Some of it is worthy of Solomon; and most of it is glorious."

"Glorious," agreed Findlater, with emotion. "And wise as you say."

"Yes; but alas! as the Roman poet discovered some two thousand years ago:

He whose wisdom cannot help him,
Gets no good from being wise.

Ah! well! my dear Findlater, he who is without sin in Dumfries let him cast the first stone. Treat him kindly. I have an idea, my friend, that you and I will be remembered solely because we happen to be where we are and he happens to be—what he is. Take care, posterity will judge you. I'm mistaken or long, long after we have ceased to take any interest in the Excise, they'll be saying this and that of how a certain supervisor behaved to his subordinate, Robert Burns. Of course," he added, lest he might be misunderstood, "we have our duty to do. Officially, the poet is no concern of ours. Our Honorable Board in Edinburgh takes no cognizance of poetry, were it Shakespeare's or King David's. All the same he is *Burns*."

Neither of them ever mentioned Ann Park to him, nor indicated by word or look they ever heard of her misfortune.

Others were less considerate. Burns, indeed, did not seem to care a crack of the fingers. He kept his head as high, his

lip as stiff as if he were the pink of respectability. But Mrs. Burns! Poor thing, how was she taking it all? A bitter, bitter pill for her. As soon as she was able to be up, neighbours called to sympathize, and she had to bear the agony of gibes and innuendoes, and worse still, the humiliation of affected pity.

"I widna' be takin' it too much to heart, Mistress Burns, if I was you," her visitors would say. "Men are just men, the best o' them. . . ." And for comfort she was told of other errant husbands, only for some reason, perhaps because he was gifted and rhymed a bit, hers was singled out. It might be a compliment, or it might not.

Jean writhed in torment, a torment intensified by the fact that Robert said never a word, good or bad, about his delinquencies. He behaved as though he had never stepped aside, as though no such person as Ann Park ever existed. She endured till she could endure no longer. Then one day out of the hell of torment came a clear decision, which, she vowed to herself, was final and unalterable. She would take her baby, go to her father and mother, and confess that her marriage was a failure, a tragedy. They would be shocked and angry, of course; very likely they would remind her of the past, tell her that she was reaping as she had sown. Perhaps they would turn her out a second time. If so, there would be only one thing left to do. But, at any rate, she would go to them like a penitent child, seeking their forgiveness, imploring them for succour in her misery.

On a soft, fragrant night of early May, when all the world, save herself, seemed to be at peace, she put the children to bed, and knelt beside them. Poor wee innocent tots! how they would waken in the morning and look and call for mother—and not find her. Her resolution faltered. Tears blinded her. Her heart was broken. Leave her children! No, no, she could not do that. She would take them with her. Somehow, somehow she would manage. But a

second's thought showed her the impossibility of the idea. She must leave them behind. *He* would take care of them. With all his faults he was an affectionate father. She rose presently, wiping her eyes. In her composition in that moment there was something of the hardness of her father, something of the determination of her mother.

Sobbing quietly she shut the door, went into the back kitchen and washed the tear-stains from her face. That done she stood a little while, rigid, almost breathless, confronting her fate. She knew that Robert was in the tiny front room in which he did his writing. He could always write, no matter what became of her. Now was the moment. With a dizzying sense of fatality, she turned quickly, took three steps and opened his door. On the threshold she halted, all her pulses in suspense. He was not writing, as she expected him to be. Instead he was hunched over his table, his head desolately on one arm, his shoulders heaving convulsively. He did not hear her enter, did not seem to be aware of her presence. As she stood gazing in a sort of dreadful fascination, there came the sound of a dry, racking sob. With a bound she darted forward and put an arm about him.

"Robert," she cried. "Robert," and as he paid no heed, again, "Robert, Robert!"

This time he put out a hand, and she clutched it as in a vice, repeating, "Robert, Robert, oh! my dearie."

He looked up, his eyes wild, his face wrung with the anguish of remorse.

"Jean," he said huskily, and stopped.

"Yes, Robert."

"My poor girl, I have disgraced you. Can you forgive me?" His tone would have melted a heart of stone.

She threw her arms about his neck; holding him as for dear life.

"Oh! Robert," she panted, and could say no more.

He made a movement, holding her off, so that he could see her face.

"My love, I ask your pardon."

She slipped to her knees, and lifted her streaming face to his.

"Kiss me, Robert," when she could speak again, she added. "I ken fine how it was, dearie. She just threw herself at your head." She could forgive the man, but never the woman.

He would have said more, but inconsistently and in the teeth of all her resolutions, she refused to listen.

"What we've to think of," she said, as though she had not a grievance in the world, "is the poor, wee motherless bairn. And I'll tell ye what we'll just do, Robert. We'll send for the innocent mite and I'll take care of it as my own."

And she did. Her father, visiting her a little later found two babies in the cradle.

"Ay," Jean told him in an offhand way. "A neebour's bairn that lost its mother, poor thing. So I'm kind o' lookin' after it."

Fortunately her father was ignorant of the truth, but to a gossip who was better informed, she remarked, with a wistful smile, "Oor Robin should hae twa wives."

CHAPTER 13

CLARINDA was back in Edinburgh. In Jamaica she found the gay McLehose with a nigger establishment and a brood of half-breeds, babbling baboo English with a Scotch accent. He showed, too, that although as an act of grace he had sent for his wife, he was by no means filled with delight to see her. Horrified and humiliated, she demanded the instant dismissal of his harem of black women. He laughed in derision. If she was jealous of the charms of his ebony beauties, she was free to take her own course. So she hastily repacked her trunks and returned by the next ship. Distressed and miserable she shut herself up like a nun bidding an everlasting adieu to a wicked world.

Burns heard of her return, and all the old feelings flamed into a blaze. He wrote to her, his "trembling bosom-chords" aching with "unutterable anguish." "Shall I hear from you?" he asked. "But first hear me." And he warned her—"No cold language, no prudential documents; I despise advice and spurn control." If she could not respond as he wished, then he adjured her "by wounded pride; by ruined peace; by frantic, disappointed passion; by all the many ills that constitute the sum of human woes, a broken heart," to be silent for ever. It would be balm to his suffering soul to hear from her; but he repeated that if she dared to send him "a page baptized in the font of sanctimonious prudence, by Heaven and earth and hell" he would tear it to atoms.

She read the frenzied message in a tumult of awe and sobs. Was he demented? Had that great mistake of making Jean Armour his wife, unhinged his mind? To her his letter was like the cry of the lost.

"My poor Sylvander," she moaned to herself. "My adorable Sylvander! Oh! God, pity us all."

In her present condition she could send no answer. Yet somehow she must find out what was happening down there in Dumfries. She saw Peggy Chalmers, who could tell her nothing; she saw Sarah Nimmo who was ready and eager to tell her a great deal. Yes, Willie Nicol and Bob Ainslie were both full of facts and rumours. There was the shocking Ann Park affair; Sarah almost blushed in mentioning it. There was also the story of the Carronades; further there were dreadful tales of tavern orgies and talk so wild that his best friends gasped in horror. What a pity he could not be more like other people and put a bridle on his tongue. Finally, as copestone to all, there was trouble with the Excise.

"And you know what they are," said Sarah with a look of deadly significance.

It really appeared that Mr. Burns was behaving as if he had lost his senses and was wantonly heading for disaster.

Unhappily there was truth in what Sarah said. In Dumfries spies and scandalmongers were on his track like sleuths; and (after the manner of their kind) easily found what they sought. His doings had got to such a pitch that respectable people were avoiding him. When they saw him coming they had sudden business on the other side of the street or passed with averted eyes or a stare and noses in the air. Yet he would take no warning. The more he was shunned or cut the more brazen he became, as though it were the joy of his soul to shock and insult and alienate.

Presently the charges were specific and still graver. Thus, at a banquet given in honour of the great Mr. Pitt, what must he do to show his disloyalty but propose the health of George Washington "a far greater man." Then at the poky little theatre, he was implicated in a drunken brawl of sedition-mongers, which was a disgrace to the town. He was also a subscriber, nay more, a contributor,

to the *Gazeteer*, a seditious rag conducted by rebellious sons of Belial in Edinburgh. Once for all it was intolerable. Accordingly the fiat went forth. He was disaffected and dangerous and must be suppressed. To that end a "private and confidential" letter went to Excise Headquarters in Edinburgh, denouncing him as a loose-liver and disloyal servant of the Crown.

Then one morning, his official superior, the kindly, friendly Alexander Findlater, sent for him on urgent business.

"What's all this, Burns?" Findlater asked, in evident concern. "What have you been doing and saying? Some busybody has been at work and a letter of complaint has gone to the Board in Edinburgh."

"What's the charge?" Burns asked, steadying himself.

"Political, mainly. It seems you have been airing your opinions a trifle too freely. You seem to have forgotten that a government official must have no politics. The result is that a man is coming down from Edinburgh to hold an enquiry on the spot."

"Into my conduct?"

"I'm afraid that's what it means."

For half a minute Burns gazed in blank dismay. He saw instant, irretrievable ruin, he saw his wife and children in beggary, because—because he had not the sense to hold his tongue. He would have protested hotly against the attempt to gag him, only it would be futile. The merciless wheels of the Excise would grind him to powder.

"Mr. Findlater," he said, recovering himself, "have I ever failed in my duty as an Excise Officer?"

"Never, never," was the prompt answer. "I'll testify to that. But politics! They're making a big fuss. It's unfortunate."

"Do you think I should see Mr. Mitchell?" Burns asked on a dizzying breath.

"No. It might get out and you'd be suspected of back-

door methods. Trust Mr. Mitchell, and this quite privately, trust me."

Burns grasped his hand in a grip of iron.

The appointed official came, held his court of enquiry and returned to make his report. Burns waited in an agony of suspense. Was it to be dismissal? If so, the good Lord have pity on him, what was he to do? Jean saw his distress, but dared not ask questions, and he dared not tell her the whole ghastly truth. He looked at her in bitter remorse; he looked at his children, innocent victims of his folly, and nearly broke down. Tomorrow they might be weeping with hunger and nothing in the cupboard. Day and night he was in torment, and the more he thought and brooded, the direr became the prospect.

Humbling himself, he went on his knees, figuratively speaking, to Commissioner Graham, confessing abjectly that wife and children "unnerve courage and wither resolution." Liberal-minded and generous, Graham, he was sure, would stand by him; but Graham was only one of many and might be over-ruled, out-voted. No one could tell what might happen. Mitchell and Findlater did not even pretend to guess. The Board was a law to itself. For the terror-stricken Burns there was nothing for it but to crush down fear and carry on as best he could. Then at last, when suspense had turned to unbearable torment, the Board announced its decision. Mr. Robert Burns was to be severely reprimanded, and told officially and peremptorily that his business was to be obedient and silent, to act and not to think.

His first feeling was one of ineffable relief. Open disaster had been averted. His wife and children were saved. Thank God they did not know how near they came to starvation, and he would never tell them. Yes, they were saved; plucked from the very brink of the black abyss of penury; but at what a cost. His independence, his boasted liberty were gone. Henceforth he was to be blind and deaf

and dumb. To see and hear and speak was for great folk, for politicians in London, for the Honourable Board in Edinburgh, for petty parochial tyrants strutting in a little brief authority. Most of them he despised. But they were his masters, and they stood over him, whip in hand, watchful and suspicious. Another slip, another indiscretion, as they reckoned things, another expression of the boiling sentiment it was so hard to bottle up, and he should be flung remorselessly on the scrap-heap. He was like a fox in a trap, the more he struggled for freedom, the more he lacerated himself.

And there was worse behind. He had confidently expected promotion. A year or two would see him Supervisor; then with fair luck and guiding, Collector, at a salary of eight hundred or a thousand pounds. That would mean the independence his heart craved; equally precious, it would mean leisure for his darling Muse to show herself, not in tiny snatches of song, the expression of momentary feelings and passions, but in great works, planned on the grand scale and executed in the grand style.

Now all that was gone, irrevocably gone. He should never be Supervisor, never Collector, never anything but an Excise drudge at the mercy of jealous, ruthless task-masters.

The humiliation was complete. Flayed in feeling, secretly despondent, almost despairing, Burns took fresh stock of himself. Thirty-four—and all his hopes and ambitions behind him. What a fate. If dumb, abject slavery was to be his portion, why was an ambition, an ideal, an aspiration, an independent wish ever planted in his mind? He was far freer, and far, far happier at the plough stils, turning up the soil, scattering seed under God's open sky. That meant grinding toil and spare diet; this was unredeemed misery. He thought of his glorious youthful prime and all he had planned to be and do. He thought of

his brief, intoxicating whirl of glory. What was it all now? Nothing, and less than nothing; for it left him poorer than before, poorer in self-respect, in true manhood, in happiness. Something, something vital, was gone, which he was powerless to recover. Not for worlds would he show it. His enemies might tear him to pieces; he would still be defiant, still hold his head high. But it was with the feelings of the damned that he walked the streets of Dumfries. How tragic, how awful to be one of God's big mistakes.

CHAPTER 14

HAPPILY there was still a trifle of balm in Gilead. From the venom of enemies and detractors Burns turned with zest, even with a measure of blitheness, to new friends, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Riddel, of Woodley Park, near by, younger brother and sister-in-law of his old Ellisland neighbour, the Laird of Friars' Carse. Mr. Riddel, a jovial man of the world, loved good company and good cheer; Mrs. Riddel, a matron of twenty, was beautiful, ardent, accomplished, and ambitious. To the poet's joy, she was also "a votary of the Muse." Being English and liberalized by travel, she had neither part nor lot in the sordid squabbles and virulent prejudices of Dumfries, which often shocked and disgusted her. Burns hailed her as Numa must have hailed Egeria; and on her part she was instantly captivated.

"The finest gentleman I have ever met," she confided to her husband, "and, as you know, I have been half round the world. Don't be jealous, dear. And what gifts, what sound good sense."

"And what poetry," put in Riddel, who relished satire when it was pungent enough.

"Yes, and what poetry. Only mark you this, his poetry is but a very small part of him and not the best; not his *forte* at all. With half the chance that some people get, Robert Burns would be the first man in the nation, and so far the first that no second would be in sight. He ought to be at Westminster. Then your Pitt, and your Fox, and your Burke would find their match, and as for the rest of the Owls, how they would babble and screech and frown and rub their astonished eyes."

"Blasphemy, Maria," laughed Riddel, who cared as much for politics and politicians as for the antics of South

Sea cannibals. "Deriding our illustrious spouters, the great and wise men who make our laws."

"Of course, of course, the great wise men with vacant upper storeys. Bah! he has brains enough for ten battalions of them, or twenty, or fifty or any other number you like. You could make a whole set of Cabinet Ministers out of the débris of a Burns and have enough left over to fit out a Privy Council and an entire bench of bishops. How comes it that the good Lord ever made him a Dumfries Exciseman?"

"Oh!" said Walter whimsically, "just to show the everlasting satire of things. Also to be a target, a cock-shy for your precious Unco Guid. Heaven knows how they would get rid of their bile without him."

In his visits to Woodley Park, Jean did not accompany her husband, declaring she was afraid to mingle with grand folk in the midst of their grandeur.

"I'd be like a hen on a hot griddle, no kennin' what to do wi' mysel'," she smiled at Robert. "I'd just shame ye. Gang yer ways alane."

But the great lady who was so girlish, so stylish and charming, called on her at the new house in Mill Vennel (known to tourists of a later day as Burns Street), and took care to leave her carriage, with its spanking greys, where all could see. And Dumfries saw and commented in its own sweet fashion.

"Fegs, but it's grand we're gettin'," it snorted. "Mud doesna stick noo-a-days, it seems. Some folk shake off disgrace as easy as a pouter o' snaw. Weel, weel! we a' ken that the bee frae the midden has aye the loodest bum."

For Robert's sake Jean rejoiced alike in the visits and the invitations, though sometimes he returned to her in the small hours more flushed and excited than she liked.

"Riddel will push the bottle," he would laugh in explanation, "and he'd be offended if I let it pass. But I'll tell you this, my love, if I drank half, or quarter, as much

as some honest godly men we could name, I couldn't come home at all—alone."

Even Mrs. Riddel was at times disturbed.

"You sit long over your wine, Walter," she remarked to her husband one night. "Once or twice I have thought Mr. Burns a little merrier, a trifle more elevated, shall we say? than was quite desirable. I think he's so constituted that drink tells on him quickly. Don't press the decanter too much, Walter."

"Pooh!" laughed Walter. "A gentleman should carry his liquor. But don't be troubled, Maria. Burns has never yet been under the table, and that's more than can be said of some of our friends. The extra glass just primes him gloriously. Then his wit gets kindled, I tell you."

The man who could not drink and drink hard "like a gentleman" was no companion for gentlemen. When Burns showed an inclination to abstinence (as he often did) Riddel and his friends laughed ironically, roaring out exhortations from "Scotch Drink." That unfortunate poem, written in a spirit of frolic and youthful devilry, was always cropping up to embarrass him. He could but compromise, that is drink reasonably with drinkers, while holding fast to good resolutions.

Already he had forsworn tavern delights. When he was not on duty, or at Woodley Park, he was at home with Jean, reading quietly or teaching his children. It was an unspeakable joy to direct their dawning intelligence, inscribe everlasting truths on the virgin white of their minds, ay, and instil those principles of right and wrong on which ultimate happiness so surely depended. He read the Bible to them, holding them spell-bound with tales of its heroes and prophets and saints. One passage he read to them again and again, hoping it might sink into their minds and bear fruit, perhaps after he was gone.

Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth, or ever

the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

Often and often in the old days, when he was himself a boy, his revered father read that passage to the assembled family, always adding solemnly, "Act on that advice and the evil days, which shall surely come, will have no terror for you." He thought of that now, with a lump in his throat.

He went to Woodley Park as to a second and brighter home. Riddel with his jovial laugh and his infectious "Pass the bottle, boys," might be a danger; but Mrs. Riddel was the most charming of antidotes. Here was a woman, young, beautiful, accomplished, whom he could admire with an admiration verging on worship, without the remotest desire to make love to her. It was a new and exquisite experience. For the first time he knew the joy of pure intellectual comradeship between man and woman undisturbed, unalloyed by any intrusion of the passions. It almost made amends for disappointments and official snubbings.

Then suddenly, as though to frustrate any reviving hope of felicity, his evil genius once more leaped into the saddle. He who had given the sovereign counsel that "prudent, cautious self-control is wisdom's root," was yet again to prove how utterly, how disastrously, he could forget or disregard his own golden axiom. Walter Riddel had been abroad for a considerable time on business, and his return was celebrated by a house-party on the grand scale. Burns was an honoured guest, and it seemed, was more engaging, more fascinating, than ever.

"Oh! yes," said the hostess to a lady whispering admiration, "my Son of Apollo is a real born magician."

The ladies left the table and the liquor began to flow. Burns, very much on his guard, made a mere pretence of drinking. Riddel saw and cried out in reproach:

"What? Funking at a time like this? I have been away,

how long I can't for the life of me mind, and when I come back, you let the bottle pass as if you weren't glad to see me. Won't do, my boy, won't do. Off with your glass, and fill again quick or I'll hold you're no friend of mine."

"Hear, hear," chimed in a dozen voices hilariously, if thickly. "Right, Riddel, my lad. Won't do, won't do, won't do. Burns of all men going back on himself. Fie for shame! Clink, man, clink."

And again his own sentiments were shouted at him, those youthful bacchanalian sentiments that were to be the drinkers' joy and his own undoing. He drank to please, and, what was not strange, the liquor grew more and more enticing the faster it flowed.

The night drave on wi' sangs and clatter,
And ay the ale was growing better.

Only it was something more potent than ale. At last, as hilarity, much punctuated by hiccoughs, broke bounds, someone rose, wildly waving his arms, and proposed a sort of Sabine raid on the drawing-room. It would be a joyous diversion, and the ladies, bless them, were sure to like it. The suggestion was hailed with riotous approval. At the last moment Riddel tried to protest, but his voice was lost in a whirlwind of clamour. Next minute a troop of drunken men, drunken Satyrs they might have seemed, burst into the drawing-room, mad with laughter and excitement. It chanced that the lady nearest Burns was his hostess. He seized her, drew her into his arms, and, before she could realize what was happening, kissed her full on the lips. With the force of instant fury, she wrenched herself free, and sprang back, facing him with blazing eyes.

"Are you mad? You—you—blackguard. You dare to insult me like this. Out of my house at once."

He stood rigid, sobered as by the thrust of a dagger between the ribs.

CHAPTER 15

IN THE dust again. Next day Mrs. Riddel received a letter, written from "the regions of hell, amid the horrors of the damned." Would she take his word of honour for it that his "errors though great were involuntary? An intoxicated man is the vilest of beasts." All the same would she in mercy pardon the offence and "pity the perdition" of the sinner? On second thought he included a poetical appeal to Riddel.

Scenes so abhorrent to my heart,
'Tis thine to pity and forgive.

There was no response. A second time he wrote and again his pleas and appeals were ignored. Then by chance he met Mrs. Riddel in the street, and she cut him dead, freezing "the very life blood" of his heart. A third time he sued for pardon, and still she was dumb.

The news flew, evil tidings have swift wings, that at last the pretty young mistress of Woodley Park had found out Exciseman Burns, and peremptorily shown him the door. The town buzzed, but was not surprised. It was what everybody expected and predicted would happen. Topers, with the snuff dribbling from their crimson noses into their filthy stoups, made merry over the sensation in tavern and howff; and trollops at whom he would not glance a second time, swore by all that was respectable they felt like locking the door when the man passed. In public there were gibes and taunts.

"I hinna seen the greys at the top of the Mill Vennel this while," a tormentor would snicker, meeting Burns. "What's come owre them? Man it canna be that ye've goen and fa'en oot wi' sic braw gentry."

The cutting retort sprang readily enough to his lips

and sometimes actually pierced the rhinoceros hides of the meddlers. But that was poor salve for lacerated feelings. Then, maddened by venomous tongues and contemptuous silence, he did an unworthy, a disgraceful thing—he turned his lethal weapons of satire against Mrs. Riddel, lampooning her savagely. But a little while before it was,

The more I praise my lovely theme,
The more I tell the truth.

Now it was,

Want only of wisdom denied her respect,
Want only of goodness denied her esteem.

And as if the shameful “Monody” were not enough, he added the yet more shameful “Epistle from Æsopus to Maria,” which may be taken as an ebullition of insanity in a frenzy of revenge. Copies went round for the general amusement, and reached the victim herself. She took no notice of them beyond remarking to Walter:

“Burns has forgotten himself again. He’ll come to in time.” At heart she was more grieved than angry.

It was a fierce joy to pour out the vials of his scorn, but the exultation was short-lived. In the swift reaction his spirits sank plumb, as if weighted with lead. As though to blight and kill, his old enemy hypochondria was upon him. Moreover the much tried body was beginning to rebel. He had mysterious pains; food lost its savour; too often his sleep was a fevered dream; at times, especially after a night of wakeful tossing, his face was drawn and haggard. One morning as he dressed, Jean called out in a startled voice:

“Eh! Robert, a hank o’ grey hairs.”

“Would it were only grey hairs,” he muttered gloomily.

She regarded him with wide anxious eyes. “Oh! my dear, ye’re no’ weel. What like’s wrang?”

It was on his tongue to answer, “Something that you

don't understand and can't put right," but instead he turned it off with a laugh, more grim than gay.

"Like the man's wife on an interesting occasion, I'm as well as could be expected."

But he knew that something radical was wrong, that the springs of life were jarred and out of joint. By himself his thoughts went back to a book he knew well and often pondered:

Rejoice O! young man in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes; but know that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Was the inexorable judgment beginning? The question brought an icy dew to his brow.

For the moment his Muse was as depressed as himself; even his beloved correspondence was neglected. When Alexander Cunningham, his lawyer-friend in Edinburgh, enquired half facetiously why he was silent, he replied without any facetiousness:

"Canst thou minister to a mind diseased? Canst thou speak peace and rest to a soul, tost on a sea of troubles, without one friendly star to guide her course, and dreading that the next surge may overwhelm her? Canst thou give to a frame, tremblingly alive as the tortures of suspense, the stability and hardihood of the rock that braves the blast? If thou canst not do the least of these, why wouldst thou disturb me in my miseries, with thy enquiries after me?"

Sick, sick, sick of heart and head, of soul and body, sick of the world, sick above all of himself, his "feelings at times could only be envied by a reprobate spirit listening to the sentence that dooms it to perdition." He had exhausted, he told Cunningham, every topic of comfort, adding this flash of self-revelation: "I was like Judas Iscariot preaching the gospel; he might melt or mould the

hearts of those around him, but his own kept its native incorrigibility."

Presently, however, his drooping energies began to revive, vastly stimulated from without. Johnson of the Musical Museum and his successor, Thomson, astutely perceiving the rich mine they had struck, were flattering and insatiable, and he responded with lavish generosity. Even Creech benefited to the extent of fifty additional songs for his new Edition—the payment to be twenty free copies. Thomson suggested a modest honorarium. Burns replied loftily that his Muse should never be prostituted to mercenary ends, and Thomson, with whom all the profit lay, politely acquiesced. He would mention filthy lucre no more. Let his dear friend, Burns, go on writing imperishable songs and be proud and happy.

One grand compensation the work had, it was a tonic, in moments of tense absorption, an anodyne that blotted out the memory of wrongs and woes. It was a sheer delight to find his Muse once more in her singing robes. Occasionally she was inclined to jib, even when the result of her effort was such a pure, distilled drop of poetry and romance as "Hark the Mavis' Evening Sang."

"That's bonnie, my sweet one," he told her. "Keep on that note and you'll cover yourself with fresh glory."

"Bonnie enough," she owned, "only the inspiration is not entirely ours. Is it worth our while to be resurrecting dead brains and refurbishing musty old stuff that it's so hard to galvanize into life? Aren't we to be original any more? Don't forget our glorious time at Mossiel. We may not be what we once were; but there's still some fire left. Let us try."

"What you say is true, my brave one," he answered. "I'm afraid our spring is past; but we'll try. Yes, I will get you another theme."

So he fell back on the old recipe of putting himself "in the regimen of adoring some fine woman." Jean being now

too much the faded, crumpled rose to serve as Divinity, he had to turn elsewhere. Accordingly a new heroine steps for a moment on the stage, the "lassie of the lint-white locks, bonnie lassie, artless lassie." In the old Ellisland days she was little Jeannie, the bright-eyed daughter of his neighbour, William Lorimer, of Kemmis Hall on the Nith; now she was Mrs. Whelpdale, and, like Clarinda, a grass-widow, though only nineteen. There were youthful matrons in those days. To Burns she was Chloris. In hostile, censorious Dumfries, and the freedom of her father's house, she had the charm of a beneficent Goddess. Her youth, her good looks, her fine figure, her lively disposition, her misfortunes, and, not least, her open, eager pride in the attentions of the bard made her an inspiring theme, as half a score of lovely lyrics attest. Poor girl, she was destined for tragedy; but, in the end, the fact, proudly declared, that she was Burns's Chloris, saved her from the worst fate that can befall a woman.

Again, too, Clarinda was stirring the embers of passion. Why was he not writing? Surely he knew his letters would always be welcome—if written in friendship only. During a tour in Galloway he found himself one dreary night in a dreary inn at Castle Douglas, with a bottle of wine as sole companion, and a mind full of the past. He was back in Edinburgh, in General's Entry, listening to the voice, thrilling to the touch of Clarinda. He took her last letter from his pocket and re-read it for the twentieth time, with suffused eyes. Fond, but timid, he thought, longing but afraid. And to be in tune he must force down his ardours, tame himself to the conventional language of "friendship." Many times, he told her now from his loneliness, he tried to obey the behest; but it would not do.

"Recollection ruins me. Ah! my ever dearest Clarinda! Clarinda! What a host of memory's tenderest offspring crowd on my fancy at that sound." She had forbidden the subject, but no inhibition could or would keep him from

making her his toast or thinking of her always as his "lovely Clarinda."

In vain would Prudence with decorous sneer,
Point out a censuring world and bid me fear;
Above that world on wings of love I rise,
I know its worst and can that worst despise.
'Wronged, injured, shunned, unpitied, unredrest,'
The mocked quotation of the scorner's jest;
Let Prudence' direst bodements on me fall,
Clarinda, rich reward, o'er pays them all.

It was his last message. Henceforth, for a variety of reasons of which she knew nothing, Sylvander was silent. One more love buried; one more dream of happiness gone.

He returned to Chloris as a sort of *dernier ressort*; yet feeling that the fairest of fair enslavers was losing the power to charm and inspire. Save when he abandoned himself to the wild joys of conviviality, he was irritable and out of temper. It irked him beyond words that he was doomed to silence. Damn all official curbs. What right had any man, or any body of men, aping omnipotence, to conspire against his liberty or dictate what he should say and do? It was an outrage. Besides the cause of Freedom was his cause and it was not prospering. The Great Revolution which he had hailed as the trumpet-call of Liberty was gone in a welter of blood and smoke. At home, politicians were muddling and quarrelling and hoodwinking as though stupidity and humbug were the chosen deities of a deluded populace. Europe was in the grip of chaos and Old Night.

For relief he turned his eyes to the West. There, thank Heaven, an unconquered champion of Freedom stood forth against the general blackness, serene, radiant, triumphant as a god, calling men to new hope, new aspirations and a new conception of manhood. So in homage he wrote his "Ode to Libertie," otherwise his "Ode for the Birthday of General Washington," a brave, beautiful,

most impolitic act. Gauger Burns had done it this time with his contempt for constituted power, his rank, rampant Republicanism.

In seething rage, some demanded another letter to the Board in Edinburgh, bluntly setting forth his crimes and misdemeanours. Others, and they were the deadlier, merely shrugged their shoulders. Was it any longer of consequence to anybody what he said or did? Give him rope and he would infallibly hang himself; in fact was he not very busy fastening the noose about his own neck? Yes, yes, just give him rope. Was it not the talk of the town that he was back to his old ways? And they made a motion as if tumbling off a glass of liquor. Nor was the talk baseless. As strict history, his own woeful confession may be cited:

"I was drunk last night; this forenoon I was polygamic; this evening I am sick and sorry."

A few, a devoted few, with eyes to see and hearts to understand, were grieved. His intimate and adoring friend, Syme, Distributor of Stamps, ventured to expostulate; and the response was an explosion of rage and a threatening flourish of the sword-cane. As poor Jean had discovered, it was becoming exceedingly difficult to talk to Robert, impossible to talk to him for his own good. Was the old adage again coming true? Whom the Gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.

CHAPTER 16

HONOUR or shame or contrition, or all three together, impressed upon Burns that he had behaved badly to Mrs. Riddel.

Therefore taking counsel of his better nature, he sent her, as an olive branch, a song in characteristic vein—

Canst Thou leave me thus my Katy?

He dared not expect a reply. Probably she would fling his appeal into the fire; it would be what he deserved, a candid monitor remarked. His joy was the more intense when back came a prompt response in kind.

Stay, my Willie, yet believe me.
Tell me that thou yet art true,
And a' my wrangs shall be forgiven;
And when this heart proves fause to thee
Yon sun shall cease its course in heaven.

It was a rebuke, a lesson and a cordial in one.

But sterner things than private friendships or graceful poetic exchanges were at stake. Babbling, blundering purblind politicians had done their worst and Britain was at war, and ill equipped for the conflict. A panicky call came for volunteers, and Burns promptly presented himself for enrolment. Fussy Tories, the little despots and dictators, still smarting from his lash, growled a refusal. They had not forgotten the sting of his wicked tongue and pen; neither had they forgiven his Republican treason. No, thanks, they would have none of him.

"My Country needs me," Burns retorted proudly. "And I am here."

He was admitted with snorts and scowls and grudgings. Then swiftly came a thrill of delighted surprise. The

pen which had extolled the revolutionary Washington, flashed out in defiance of France.

The wretch that would a Tyrant own,
And the wretch, his true-born brother,
Who would set the Mob aboon the Throne,
May they be damned together.

"Heh, heh, what's this?" cried his old enemies and critics, finding the change almost incredible. "Curse all Frenchmen. That's the stuff, Burns, my lad, that's the stuff. More of it."

And they chanted jubilantly,

Who would set the Mob aboon the Throne,
May they be damned together.

A rousing slogan, and from Burns. Here was a change of heart worth many votes. What might his pen not do for them! By Gad! sir, he would make the country ring and ring again.

But even while they shouted for joy, what must the misguided man do but go off at a tangent and write election ballads for abominable, treasonable Whigs! Would he never have sense, never understand what their patronage could do for him? A word whispered in the right ear, a Jovian nod and up he would go. Supervisor, Collector, even Chief Officer to the Board in Edinburgh—these and other favours were all within the scope of their influence. What spoils of loyalty he missed. Ah! well, bray a fool in a mortar, he would still be a fool, blind as a bat to his own interest, deaf as the adder of Scripture. So after a glowing smile or two, they turned away, leaving the foolish man to his fate.

And fate was again vixenish. Since he could not be wise and put money in his purse, snobbery disowned him. Even Mrs. Dunlop, to whom he had so often and so freely opened his heart, ceased to answer his letters. In his mind's eye he could see her tucking in her genteel skirts and screw-

ing her owlish face in horror and disdain. He swore it did not matter "a cat's curse." Come to think of it, her lachrymose maunderings bored him. All the same he was cut to the quick. The world, his world, was becoming stale, flat, and unprofitable. Even Chloris had ceased to charm. Presently her very name was an offence.

One solace, and one only, was left. In the tavern among the rank and file, what superior persons called the ruck of humanity, he could still enjoy freedom, jollity, companionship. So he went to taverns, where he was without peer, and let his tongue run in satire which brought rounds upon rounds of laughter and applause. Never had toppers, soaked in liquor, sunk in stupidity, such a boon companion.

Through all, he did his official duties punctually. Findlater, who knew more than he durst tell, was frankly amazed. Could the man, who was so exact and efficient during official hours, spend his nights as report said he did? Was it physically and mentally possible? Sometimes he made an errand of mercy to the little house in the Mill Vennel, when he knew the master was absent. Jean affected cheerfulness; but there was anxiety in the pale, pinched face, once so full and florid. She owned Robert was not just as weel as she could wish. That nasty rheumatism bothered him, and his appetite was not what it should be. Some mornings he went out without tasting a morsel of breakfast, and on returning at night he was too tired to eat. She thought he needed a bit rest, only he would not hear of it; in fact, when she suggested it, he got angry.

"Ye ken, sir," said Jean, "his work comes afore a' else wi' him."

"Yes, Mrs. Burns," agreed Findlater. "I ken."

Plainly, too plainly, however, he saw that things were not going well with the household. Jean was showing signs, the whole family were showing signs of being sadly down at heel. Even Burns himself was losing the old clean,

spruce, dandyish look. Was he losing heart, or were the lures of pleasure, the promptings of self-indulgence becoming too much for him? True, not only did he do his work faithfully to the last iota; but, as Findlater knew, fed the insatiable maw of George Thomson. A miracle of a man, truly a miracle.

But Nature, however patient and long-suffering, is inexorable in the end. Soon the inevitable happened. One morning Findlater received a shaky note, informing him, with many regrets, that Burns was in bed and medically forbidden to leave his room. And, as if Fate had chosen that moment to strike her most cruel blow, there came to Burns heart-rending news. His little daughter, Elizabeth Riddel (so named in honour of his friend, Mrs. Riddel), a toddler of less than three, had been sent to Mauchline for health, and died in the house of her grandfather, James Armour.

Burns was broken-hearted. Of all his children she was his favourite. Times without number she had sat on his knee, and got her soft, chubby arms tight about his neck, while she prattled her love. And holding her to him, he had often wondered and speculated what her lot was to be among the felon snares of the world. His innocent little darling, with the big trustful eyes—his own over again—and the boundless faith in him. He could not even attend her funeral, or see her grave; and he never did, except in fevered visions of the night. Coming on the top of other misfortunes, the blow crushed, wrenched, and broke, as it seemed, the very springs of life. From that hour the old Burns was dead or dying.

He returned to duty, lamely as a man on crutches, whose strength is spent. Yet even then he forgot to be wise. We have reached the year 1796, the fatal year. In the end of January, he attended a Masonic Lodge meeting, shivering and wretched. A week later he was sharing festivities at a banquet in the Globe Tavern. For a little

while, stimulated by wine and jovial fellowship, he was royally himself. Never, it was remarked, was Burns more gloriously gay and brilliant. It was the last leaping flame of the spent candle. The bottle went round with riotous shoutings. Who last fell beside his chair was King of the feast. Burns was in no condition to vie with the seasoned boozers of Dumfries. He fell out early. Then some time after midnight, he went forth into the bitter, freezing February night, when no man was sober enough to see or care what became of him. Gossip has embellished the tale of that night, and scandal has added its black embroideries. The one plain fact is, that in the small hours of the morning, halfway between midnight and dawn, he staggered home to Jean, dazed, almost speechless, shaking as with palsy. She put him to bed and an hour or two later his friend and physician, Maxwell, was with him. Rheumatic fever, with heart-weakness, was the diagnosis.

Thomson continued to importune him, and presently he was able to answer:

"Alas, my dear Thomson, I fear it will be some time ere I tune my lyre again. Rheumatism, cold, and fever, have formed to me a terrible Trinity in Unity, which makes me close my eyes in misery and open them without hope."

Duty had to go. Then one day Findlater had to perform the heart-breaking task of making the official suggestion that Mr. Robert Burns, being incapacitated, should retire from the service.

Burns leaped up in living terror.

"Retire?" he exclaimed wildly. "Retire? My God, oh! my God! what is to become of my wife and children?"

CHAPTER 17

RETIREMENT was not made compulsory. Findlater, who would have given his left hand and most of his salary to save his subordinate, spoke to Collector Mitchell, and Mitchell, being a man of understanding, nodded approval.

"You are responsible for the work, Findlater," he said. "If you are satisfied, I am. Do the best you can, and God help us all to be a little wise."

"Amen, sir," said Findlater devoutly.

Accordingly Burns, a tottering shadow of his former self, "reported for duty." For Jean's sake he would try once more to keep a brave front. For himself he was little enough concerned. Save for a few fleeting hours of joy, mostly fictitious, he had not found life so very desirable a thing that it might not be surrendered without any acute agony of regret. But Burns's widow and helpless orphans! There was the excruciating thought. Often it was hard to keep back the cry of anguish and foreboding; but he shut his mouth tight. Any sign of cowering, any show of fear, would but aggravate distress, add misery to misery.

When Maxwell talked lightly of restored health and renewed activity, he smiled wanly. Maxwell was a good fellow, a true friend and most assiduous physician; but he could not perform miracles. The best he could do was to coax nature and nature, too plainly, was past coaxing.

"Don't fool me, Maxwell," he said, one day as he lay helplessly gritting his teeth. "Tell me candidly is Fate serving her summons?"

"We won't talk foolishness, if you please," was the curt retort.

"Ah! Maxwell, Maxwell," rejoined Burns, without any curtness. "If you were where I am, feeling as I feel, you

might not think the question foolish. However, I suppose, it's a good maxim even in medicine, that while there's life there's hope."

"The very best in the world," agreed Maxwell decisively. "So good that I prescribe it here and now as part of the treatment. Please take it to heart."

Burns looked up, a queer, misty glimmer in his sunken eyes.

"My dear friend, the many, many things I have to take to heart at this moment. You wouldn't believe."

"Oh!" said Maxwell blithely. "If you want to count over your sins, I'm ready as deputy for the Recording Angel. Fire away. I daresay they'll be picturesque and alluring. Hark," he broke off. "Jessy Lewars talking to Mrs. Burns. She'll be in this minute. Now, you'll smile."

He rose and opened the door, and a girl, bright-eyed and fresh with the freshness of eighteen, slipped into the room, like a ray of sunshine. Burns did smile, a smile of joyous welcome, as well he might. She was the sister of a colleague in the Excise and a ministering angel to the stricken household in the Mill Vennel. Every day she came to help Jean, to mother the children, above all, to cheer and wait on the invalid. He repaid her in the lasting coin of the poet, making the name and memory of Jessy Lewars for ever dear and honoured in the annals of devotion. She was the last of his heroines; in the hour of need his tenderest, most devoted nurse.

One day, while she was at her post, there came to him an invitation from Mrs. Riddel to attend a King's Birthday ball, at which all Dumfries was to make a splash of loyalty. In a piquant little postscript, she asked for a copy of his latest song.

"I hope you'll be able to go, Robert," said Jean, ever anxious to see him make a good figure among his neighbours.

"Of course he'll go," chimed in Jessy. "He's ever so

much better, and in this glorious June weather, he couldn't catch cold if he tried. We'll hap him up and make him safe."

Burns smiled fondly and sadly.

"Maybe, my dear, if you carry me."

"And that would be a sight for folk to gape at," laughed Jessy. "And you'd make another song about me, wouldn't you?" she added archly. It was her cue to be resolutely cheerful.

"Another, and another, and another if I could. But my dear —— Well! never mind. If you bring me the materials I'll scrawl a note of thanks to Mrs. Riddel. It was kind of her to think of me."

Painfully, with a hand that could scarcely hold the pen, he explained that he was utterly unable to show his loyalty in any way.

"I meet every face," he told her, "with a greeting like that of Balak to Balaam—*Come curse me, Jacob, come defy me, Israel*. Would you have me in such circumstances copy you out a love-song?" And as if the old Burns were having a last fling, "No, if I must write, let it be sedition or blasphemy, or something else that begins with a B, so that I may grin with the grin of iniquity and rejoice with the rejoicing of an apostate angel."

Every day, often several times a day, Jean questioned Maxwell, with terror in her wild, sleepless eyes. He put her off with deft evasions and even flagrant, downright lying. But one day he was obliged to take her aside and tell her the truth he could no longer hide or dissemble. His skill was exhausted. There was but one hope left—sea-bathing, with gentle riding and country air and quiet. Burns must be got off at once.

Poor Jean reeled; and hearing the fiat Burns declared almost angrily that the scheme was flatly impossible. Sea-bathing, country quarters would mean cash and his purse

was empty. Maxwell did not understand what he was proposing.

"No, no, my dear Maxwell," replied the tortured Burns. "It cannot be done. Don't torment me. If it's to be Last Post, let me shuffle off the mortal coil quietly where I am."

"Who said it is to be Last Post, and who talks of shuffling off the mortal coil?" demanded Maxwell. "As to going, for once you'll do what you're told. No protests now, no argument. Obedience is the word. I'll make all arrangements. And," stooping and lowering his voice, "mind you, no worry over money. That'll be seen to. Worry is the devil's deadliest weapon."

"God bless you, my friend," said Burns, grasping Maxwell's hand.

Brow on the Solway was the place chosen, and Maxwell was blithely optimistic. It was July; the weather was gorgeous. Sunshine, roses, perfumes, bright skies, and laughing, caressing waters, what would they not do? Up heart and away with despondency. Burns, racked in nerve and muscle and joint, tried to believe. He was heartened, too, by a cordial note from Mrs. Riddel, who happened to be near, also for her health.

"I need cheering up. Come and share a modest dinner. For your life, don't fail. I will send my carriage for you."

"Cripple helping cripple," Burns smiled woefully.

He went, meeting her with the salutation:

"Well! Madam, have you any commands for the other world?"

She turned the question with a jest; all the same, she saw "the stamp of death imprinted on his features." Yet in talk he was animated, if he could no longer be gay. He regretted, to her he might well regret, having satirized and lampooned persons against whom he had no real ill-feeling. That was on the fifth of July. On the sixth they met again for a few minutes, and parted "to meet no more."

Next day he was explaining the situation and inter-

polating a request to his friend Cunningham, the Edinburgh lawyer.

"You actually would not know me if you saw me. Pale, emaciated and so feeble as occasionally to need help from my chair, my spirits fled, fled."

Officialdom (outside Dumfries) had cut his salary of seventy pounds in half. "What way, in the name of thrift," he asked, "shall I maintain myself and keep a horse in country quarters with a wife and five children at home, on thirty-five pounds?" He intended to petition the Board for increased allowance. Cunningham had influence; would he put in a word? If the petition failed, then he, the petitioner, would have the choice of dying of disease or perishing with hunger.

At the same time, he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop, pathetically reminding her of his unanswered letters.

"Your friendship," he confessed to her, "with which for many years you honoured me, was a friendship dearest to my soul. The remembrance yet adds one pulse more to my poor pulsating heart. *Farewell.*" Mrs. Dunlop took no notice.

The remembrance struck a chord which carried him back far, far beyond that broken friendship. As by magic, his whole past life lay unrolled before him like a map. At an immense distance he saw himself, as on a shining hill-top, looking forth upon the world with bright eyes, eager for adventure and conquest. It was hard to recognize that blithe, radiant figure, alive with hope and ambition.

Once again he was a child beside his mother. His mother, his dearly loved, much-tried mother, so brave, so patient, so often grieved and hurt, so ready to forgive, ay, and to find excuses for forgiveness. God pardon him for all the pain he had caused her: God comfort her in the trouble that was coming. He heard his father reading from the Book of Books, and gravely enforcing its lessons. Oh! that he had heeded what he heard and taken to heart the counsel

which dear-bought wisdom lavished upon him, while yet there was time. Too late now, too late, too late. Once more he was in the fields with Gilbert and his sisters and the hired helpers, toiling in sun and wind and rain, yet somehow, by some miraculous provision of youth, merry and light-hearted. How remote, how strange and wonderful all that was now. Could he be that child, that boy, that youth, that strong man, rejoicing in his strength? It was hard to believe.

O! the days that were.

Then other figures passed before him, as in a procession—Nellie Kirkpatrick, who bound sheaves with him in the harvest field when he and she were fifteen. The first inspirer of his song. Lord! how early the ruling passion declared itself. Following close came Peggy Thomson, the girl who so abruptly ended his brief schooling at Kirkoswald, when he was seventeen. A short distance behind came the shadowy Agnes Fleming; and pretty, sprightly Ellison Begbie. He had made ardent, honourable love to Ellison and she had rejected him. How wise. Did some intuition, some prescient sense of what was to be, warn her?

Then, Jean, standing out conspicuous. Jean! He recalled their first random meeting. Poor girl, would it have been better for her had she never danced at that fateful Penny Wedding, or flung her laughing challenge next day on the bleaching-green at Mauchline? It had to be, and it was. What a witch was Destiny, how cunningly she first lured, and then mocked, her victims.

Close behind Jean, almost abreast of her, came another figure, treading softly, as with fairy feet, a light in her tender blue eyes that nearly made him choke. Mary, his ever beloved Mary! To her God was kind. She went in the bloom of youth and innocence, not tarrying for the evil days. He was glad of that now, glad, glad that she had been spared so much. Moreover she was waiting for

him. He could see her dear face on that wonderful Sabbath day by the gurgling Ayr; only now it was serene as with a divine content, radiant with unearthly bliss. He paused long over the beatific vision, his eyes misty.

Next Clarinda, odd compound of poetess and Puritan, the woman who could live with him and die with him; and Peggy Chalmers, whose good sense and sweet disposition would keep any man safe and happy. Not far behind were Chloris and Anna Park. Anna left him a legacy, not of joy, but of shame. He sobbed aloud. Great God! what a procession, what memories, what wrecks of shattered dreams! How far, how terribly far and by what tempestuous ways he had travelled.

Lastly, as by a freak of memory, there rose before him young Charlotte Hamilton, the beautiful sister of his friend, Gavin. She had never been in his life as were those others; yet in the strange mirage of recollection, his thoughts rested on her as he once saw her, a lovely vision, at Harvieston, by the winding Devon, under the purple Ochil Hills. Somebody said that, giving ear to evil tales, Charlotte, now Mrs. Adair, was angry with him. So in the old manner, he made his protest and supplication with "Fairest Maid on Devon Banks." It was the last fond effort of his Muse, the very last. Though he scarcely guessed it, she, too, was saying Farewell.

Hardly was the song written when he was in throes of consternation. One Williamson, a tailor, to whom he owed seven pounds, chose that moment to demand through Matthew Penn, a heartless Dumfries lawyer, immediate payment. It was an ironic circumstance that the debt was due for his Volunteer Uniform. Desperate, almost demoralized, not knowing where to turn for money, he applied in panic to Thomson.

"After all my boasted independence, curst necessity compels me to implore you for Five Pounds. Do, for God's sake, send me that sum; and that by return of post. For-

give me this earnestness; but the horrors of a jail made me half distracted. Forgive, forgive me."

In the same strain he wrote to his cousin, James Burness, Solicitor, Montrose:

"Will you be so good as to accommodate me, and that by return of post, with ten pounds. O James, did you know the pride of my heart, you would feel doubly for me! Alas! I am not used to beg. How shall I use the language to you? Oh! do not disappoint me, but strong necessity's curst demanded—"

It was the terrorized cry of the drowning man. In both instances, the money was promptly sent; but it came too late. Everything seemed to be too late now. The rest is soon told. Tortured in body, his feelings flayed alive, and much concerned for Jean, who was daily expecting her confinement, Burns returned home, so weak and wasted that he could not stand by himself. Maxwell, his devoted physician, was with him; and Jessy Lewars quickly resumed her self-imposed duties as nurse. Jean, poor soul, could do little but weep.

Outside word flew that Burns was dying. Then, to the credit of human nature be it recorded, an instant wave of pity, sympathy and admiration swept over Dumfries. Men and women talked of him with bated breath. All at once, as though scales fell from blind eyes, he seemed very wonderful. His faults were forgotten, his good qualities, his extraordinary gifts, his marvellous achievements were remembered. To watching, anxious groups, the little house in the Mill Vennel became the object of reverential awe. Within that shabby dwelling, in want, and misery they were now powerless to prevent or relieve, the greatest man of his time (so good judges said) was fighting the last grim fight.

"How is he?" they would ask one another on meeting, not without a sharp twinge of remorse. One group caught

Findlater (ever the practical helper) coming out, with tears in his eyes; and pounced on him for news.

"Going hence," he answered brokenly. "Going hence, fast," and hurried on as though he could say no more.

Three days the lone fight lasted. On the second day the sick man suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, calling "Gilbert, Gilbert." For a moment delirium carried him back once more to early days at Mossiel. But the darkened mind was soon back in the troubled present, groping, groping for something it could not find.

Early on the third morning watchers by his bedside noticed his face take on, for an instant, an expression of intense, fierce hate, and those standing close heard a muttered imprecation on Williamson and Penn. It was his last utterance on earth, a curse on his tormentors.

The July sun rose, waking the world to new life and brightness. Knowing how he loved the light, Jessy Lewars silently raised the blind, and a beam of sunshine illumined the dark, still room. He did not see it. He lay breathing heavily. All at once he shuddered, as in cold. Then by swift degrees the breathing became slower, laboured a moment, softened as in sleep; then on a great sigh, as of unspeakable weariness, fluttered and ceased. Life's fitful fever was ended. Robert Burns was dead.

Disappointment, Misfortune, Folly, Tragedy, had done their fell work.

Vex not his ghost; O! let him pass, he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.

POSTSCRIPT

FIVE days later, that is, on the twenty-sixth of July, Clarinda read this announcement in her newspaper, the *Edinburgh Advertiser*:

On the 21st. inst., died at Dumfries after a lingering illness, the celebrated Robert Burns. . . . The public, to whose amusement he has so largely contributed, will learn with regret that his extraordinary endowments were accompanied with frailties which rendered them useless to himself and his family. The last months of his life were spent in sickness and indigence.

The paper fell from her fingers. Burns dead—in wretchedness and penury. Could the ghastly statement be true? Burns dead; Burns dead! She could only repeat the staggering, heart-rending words, till she found relief in a paroxysm of tears.

About the same time, his mother sat in the kitchen at Mossgiel, her hands lying limp in her lap. Her face was tragic but her eyes were dry, grief with her being too deep for tears. Gilbert had just returned from the funeral. It was a great funeral, he said, the greatest ever seen in Dumfries—streets densely lined by sorrowing spectators, flags at half mast, the roll of muffled drums, a military procession, stepping slow and solemn to the Dead March in Saul, Robert's hat and sword on the coffin, and then three volleys over his grave for farewell. A grand, a most impressive, most moving spectacle.

She heard as though a knife were turned in her heart. Neglected, left to perish in abject misery, and then buried with a world of pomp and parade. It was hard to forgive that crowning satire. Coming earlier, their appreciation had

been kind and helpful; over the dead body their profuse, ostentatious honours were a cruel mockery.

"My Robin!" she murmured desolately. "My Robin!"

What a journey from the little clay biggin in Alloway to that house of death in Dumfries. Why had the God she trusted with all her heart and soul and mind, singled her out of all women for this bitter, this overwhelming experience?

One thing Gilbert did not tell her, because he did not know. When the crowds out to see a spectacle, had departed, and night and silence took possession of the churchyard, a woman with a young girl for companion, climbed the wall, carrying an armful of laurels, which she strewed on the new-made grave. It was Maria Riddel. She knelt the better to arrange her tribute. That done, she bowed her head till it nearly touched the ground.

"Farewell, my dear, great friend," she said, a sob in her voice. "A long farewell. Rest, rest, you are safe at last. We shall look on your face no more, but you have left that which will not die."

She rose, wiping her eyes. "Look well," she told the wondering, awe-struck girl by her side. "Look well, my dear, that you may remember in days to come. A great, a very great man lies here, as even this callous world will one day discover."

Her prophecy was to be fulfilled more quickly than she thought. The fame, so valueless, as it seemed, to himself, was to prove invaluable to those he loved; so that in death he helped as he had never been able to help in life, noble and generous though he had been when he had aught to spare.

For four and twenty years after he was gone, his mother lived in honour and comfort because in her illustrious son she had given the world a priceless treasure. "Burns's mother," people would say, some of them the greatest and best in the land, as though they did homage to a queen.

They even came long distances to see her, to shake her hand and tell her how Robin's memory was lodged in all hearts and how his name would live on men's lips for ever. Many and many a night she thanked God on bended knee for such a son.

And Jean also found that his ever expanding fame made "a happy fire-side clime" for her and hers. He had known how it would be. When almost in his death agony had he not comforted her by saying, "Don't be afraid. I'll be more respected a hundred years after I am dead, than I am at present." Yes, he was a true prophet. His good deeds were not interred with his bones, but lived and bore fruit a thousand fold for his dear ones, even as he would have had it. For nigh two score years she continued to live in the little house in the Mill Vennel, lacking nothing; and saw her sons honoured and advanced because they bore the name of Burns. Her one sorrowing thought was, that *he* was not there to share what his genius had won.

Nor did benefits stop there. One night, many years after that great funeral scene in Dumfries, as Clarinda (now a widow) sat musing in her house in Calton Place, Edinburgh, a visitor was announced. It was a lady who preferred not to give her name to the servant. She was admitted, heavily veiled; with a nervous, agitated jerk, she threw back her veil, and Clarinda saw a face which for all the ravages of time and misfortune, she instinctively felt must once have been beautiful.

"You are not prepared for this visit, Mrs. McLehose," said the stranger, speaking in manifest stress of emotion.

"No," was the answer. "Have we ever met before?"

"Never before," said the stranger. "Yet there is a link between us." Then after a beating pause, "I—I am Burns's Chloris."

"Burns's Chloris?" The words came as though the speaker had been shot.

"Yes, Burns's Chloris. And—and you are his Clarinda. Oh! Lord! I am nearly fainting."

Clarinda hastily set a chair and the stranger sat down, panting.

"You'll want proof," she said presently, recovering herself a little. "Here it is." And she produced the much soiled, but carefully preserved manuscripts of half a dozen songs. Holding her breath, Clarinda glanced at the writing she knew so well.

"Yes," she gasped. "That—is Burns's writing. Oh! how ——? But first tell me your story."

The story she heard was a sad one.

"But," ended the narrator, "some ladies and gentlemen here in Edinburgh have been kind to Burns's Chloris—for his sake. She is comfortable now. It's a long, long time since she gave up all thought of being happy. For all that it's proud, proud she is of what has been."

Speechless with emotion, Clarinda gazed a moment; then suddenly overcome she folded Chloris in a frantic embrace.

"Now," she said, drawing back, her tears raining unheeded; "tell me about Burns in those last days in Dumfries, all, everything. You loved him?"

Chloris looked up with something of the old arch expression which was once so captivating.

"Could any woman help it? And you?"

Clarinda flushed scarlet through her tears.

"Could any woman help it? My dear, you have given the answer."

THE END





